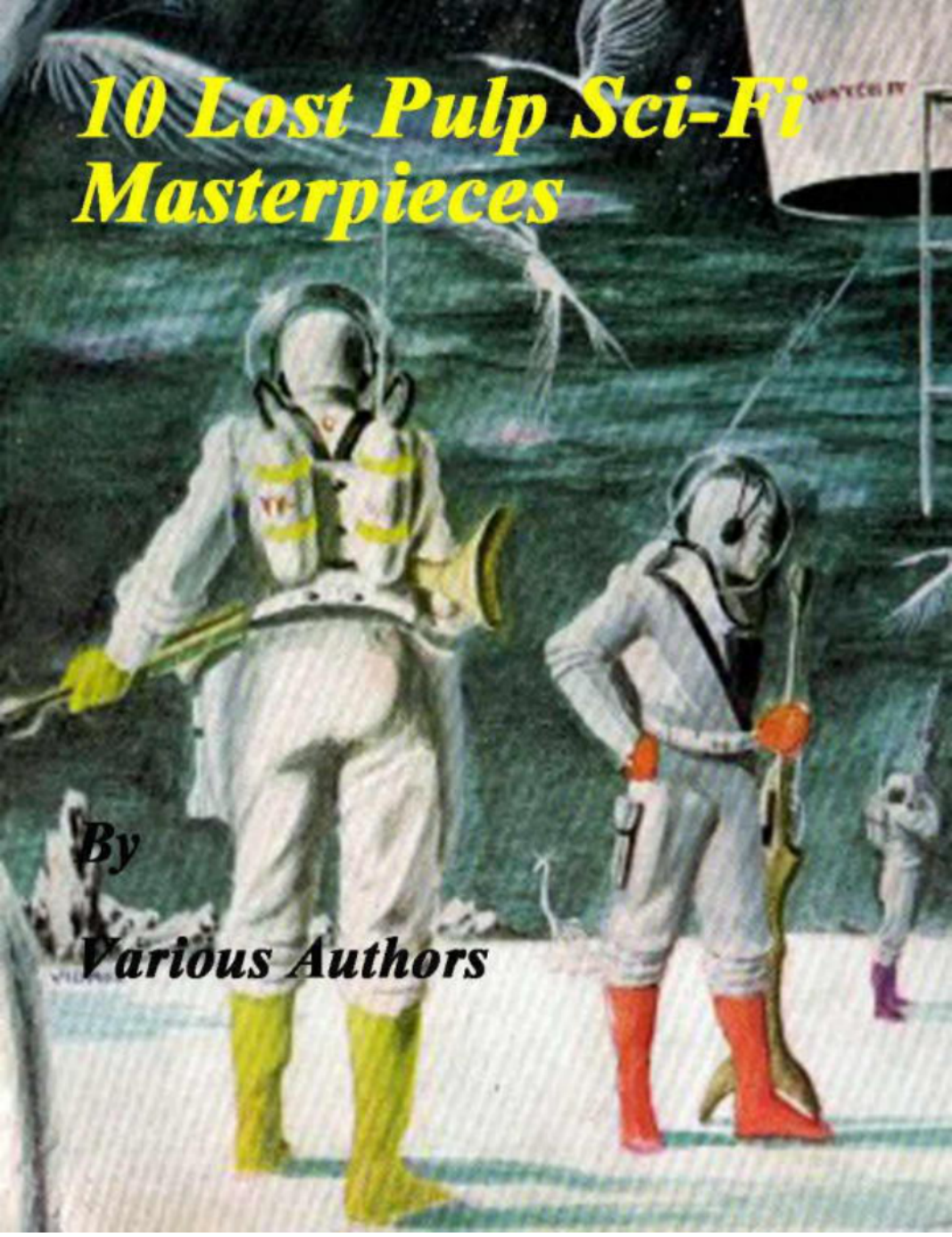
10 Lost Pulp Sci-Fi Masterpieces
By
Various Authors

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Annotation

Imagine 167 pages of vintage, hardcore, pulp science fiction with no holds barred, and you have in an instant the essence of this compilation.

Plus, classic, pulp illustrations of beautiful—dare I say it—buxom babes!

You will find these and more in this collection of lost, sci-fi pulp masterpieces.

- 10 LOST PULP SCI-FI MASTERPIECES
  - THE IMPOSSIBLE VOYAGE HOME
    - I
    - II
  - THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING
  - THE VICTOR
  - THE HUDDLERS
  - NEW HIRE
  - ALL THAT GOES UP
  - MATE IN TWO MOVES
    - I
    - II
    - III
    - IV
    - V
  - THE UNLEARNED
  - THE VALLEY
  - UNIFORM OF A MAN
  - Copyright

10 LOST PULP SCI-FI MASTERPIECES by the Various Authors

THE IMPOSSIBLE VOYAGE HOME

By F.L. Wallace

Illustrated by Dick Francis

I

The right question kept getting the wrong answer—but old Ethan and Amantha got the right answer by asking the wrong question!

"Space life expectancy has been increased to twenty-five months and six days," said Marlowe, the training director. "That's a gain of a full month."

Millions of miles from Earth, Ethan also looked discontentedly proud. "A mighty healthy-looking boy," he declared.

Demarest bent a paperweight ship until it snapped. "It's something. You're gaining on the heredity block. What's the chief factor?"

"Anti-radiation clothing. We just can't make them effective enough."

Across space, on distant Mars, Amantha reached for the picture. "How can you tell he ain't sickly? You can't see without glasses."

Ethan reared up. "Jimmy's boy, ain't he? Our kids were always healthy, 'specially the youngest. Stands to reason their kids will be better."

"Now you're thinking with your forgettery. They were all sick, one time or another. It was me who took care of them, though. You always could find ways of getting out of it." Amantha touched the chair switch.

The planets whirled around the Sun. Earth crept ahead of Mars, Venus gained on Earth. The flow of ships slackened or spurted forth anew, according to what destination could be reached at the moment:

"A month helps," said Demarest. "But where does it end? You can't enclose a man completely, and even if you do, there still is the air he breathes and food he eats. Radiation in space contaminates everything the body needs. And part of the radioactivity finds its way to the reproductive system."

Marlowe didn't need to glance at the charts; the curve *was* beginning to flatten. Mathematically, it was determinable when it wouldn't rise at all. According to analysis, Man someday might be able to endure the radiation encountered in space as long as three years, if

exposure times were spaced at intervals.

But that was in the future.

"There's a lot you could do," he told Demarest. "Shield the atomics."

"Working on it," commented Demarest. "But every ounce we add cuts down on the payload. The best way is to get the ship from one place to another faster. It's time in space that hurts. Less exposure time, more trips before the crew has to retire. It adds up to the same thing."

On Mars, Amantha fondled the picture. "Pretty. But it ain't real." She laid it aside.

Ethan squinted at it. "I could make you think it was. Get it enlarged, solidified. Have them make it soft, big as a baby. You could hold it in your lap."

"Outgrew playthings years ago." Amantha adjusted the chair switch, but the rocking motion was no comfort.

Ethan turned the picture over, face down. "Nope. Hate to back you up, 'Mantha, but it ain't the same. There's nothing like a baby, wettin' and squallin' and smilin', stubborn when it oughtn't to be and sweet and gentle when you don't expect it. Robo-dolls don't fool anybody who's ever held the real thing."

In the interval, Earth had drawn ahead. The gap between the two planets was widening.

"That's another fallacy," objected the training director. "The body can stand just so much acceleration. We're near the limit. What good are faster ships?"

"That's your problem," said Demarest. "Get me tougher crewmen. Young, afraid of nothing, able to take it."

It always ended here—younger, tougher, the finest the race produced—and still not good enough. And after years of training, they had twenty-five months to function as spacemen. It was a precious thing, flight time, and each trip was as short as science could make it. Conjunction was the magic moment for those who went between the planets.

It was the heredity block that kept Man squeezed, confined to Earth, Mars and Venus, preventing him from ranging farther. The heredity block was a racial quantity, the germ plasm, but not just that. Crew and passengers were protected as much as possible from radiation encountered in space and that which originated in the ship's drive. The protection wasn't good enough. Prolonged exposure had the usual effects, sterilization or the production of deformed mutations.

Man was the product of evolution on a planet. He didn't step out into space without payment.

The radiation that damaged genes and chromosomes and tinier divisions also struck nerve cells. Any atom might be hit, blazing, into fission and decaying into other elements. The process was complicated. The results were not: the nerve was directly stimulated, producing aural and visual hallucinations.

Normally, the hallucination was blanked out. But as the level of body radioactivity increased, so did the strength of the vision. It dominated consciousness. The outside world ceased to have meaning.

The hallucination took only one form, a beautiful woman outside the ship, unclad and beckoning.

It was the image of vanished fertility that appeared once the person was incapable of reproducing *as a human*.

Why this was so hadn't been determined. Psychologists had investigated and learned only that it invariably occurred after too great exposure. There was another thing they learned. No, that had come first. This was the reason they had investigated.

In the Solar System, the greatest single source of radiation, including the hard rays, was the Sun. It was natural that the siren image should seem stronger in that direction, that it should fade or retreat toward its origin. No one had ever returned from compulsive pursuit of the illusionary woman, though in early days radio contact had been made with ships racing toward the Sun.

The heredity block was self-enforcing.

Deviously, the race protected itself, or something higher watched over it to assure *human* continuity. Marlowe wasn't sure which, but it was there.

"I think you're on the wrong track," he said. "Shield the ship completely and it won't matter how long the trip takes. The crew can work in safety."

Demarest grunted. "Some day we'll have an inertia-free drive and it won't matter how much mass we use. It does now. Our designs are a compromise. Both of us have to work with what's possible, not what we dream of. I'll build my ship; you find the right crew to man it."

Marlowe went back to his graphs. Machines could be changed, but the human body clung stubbornly to the old patterns. He couldn't select his crews any younger—but was there perhaps a racial type more resistant to radiation? Where? No place that he knew of. Maybe the biologists could produce one, he thought hopefully, and knew he was fooling himself. Human beings weren't fruit flies; by the time enough generations rolled around for the resistant strain to breed true —and leave a surplus to man the ships—he would be long dead and the problem solved.

The best of humanity would be dead, too, wiped out by

sterilization.

Or the Solar System would be peopled by mutant monstrosities.

Far away, and not concerned with the problem, Ethan shrugged resignedly. “Guess we’ll have to get used to the idea—we just won’t see him till he grows up—if we’ll still be around.”

“You’ve got years and years ahead of you, and not worth a thing the whole time!” Amantha snapped.

“Damnation,” said Ethan wistfully, “I’d like to dandle him.”

“Won’t be the same when he grows up and comes here,” Amantha conceded. “There I go agreein’ with you! What’s got into me?”

“Maybe we can get on the next slow ship. They run them once in a while for people with weak hearts.” He considered. “Don’t know whether Retired Citizens’ Home will let us go, though.”

“Retired Citizens!” She blew her nose scornfully. “They think we don’t know it’s just a home for the aged!” She threw away the tissue. “Think they’ll let us?”

“It won’t be them so much that’ll stop us. Our hearts ain’t too good and we haven’t got much space time to use. We shouldn’t have gone to Venus.”

“We had to see Edith and Ed and their kids and we had to come back to Mars so we could be near John and Pearl and Ray. Let’s not regret what we’ve done.” She picked at the chair arm. “We’ve been here a long time, ain’t we?”

Ethan nodded.

“Maybe they’ve forgotten we’ve only got a month left,” she said eagerly.

“You sure it’s a month?”

“Figure it out. It took longer when we went.”

“Then it’s no use. A slow ship is all we’d be allowed to take—and we wouldn’t be allowed because it’d be more than a month.”

“They won’t remember every last minute we spent in space.”

“They will, too,” he stated. “They’ve got records.”

“Maybe they lost them.”

“Look, we’ve got kids and grandchildren here. They come around and see us. Do we have to go to Earth, ’specially when it’d be against the law?”

“That’s just it,” she argued. “We’ve seen all our other kids’ kids. Ain’t we going to see the youngest? How do we know his wife can take care of a baby? I can’t sleep nights, thinking of it.”

“Try catnaps during the day, like I do.”

Amantha touched the button and the automatic chair stopped abruptly. “Are you going to try to get tickets or aren’t you?”

“I’ll think about it. Go ahead and rock.”

"I won't," she said obstinately, "not even if it was the kind of chair you can rock yourself. I thought I married a man who'd make me happy."

"I've always done my best. Go ahead and rock."

"But will you try to get the tickets?"

Ethan nodded resignedly and felt better when the chair began to swing back and forth. There was no living with a woman when she didn't have peace of mind.

Amantha lay in bed, listening. Sometimes her hearing was very good, the way it used to be. Other times, it wasn't worth a thing. The way it came and went reminded her of when she was young and used to wonder why old folks couldn't hear. Now she could often lie next to Ethan and not even notice whether he was snoring. Tonight her hearing was good.

Footsteps came from the hall, creaky noises of someone trying not to make a sound. She'd lain awake many nights, hearing him come home. She knew who it was and for once she didn't mind. The Home for Retired Citizens had rules.

Careful, she thought. There's the bad spot where the floor's thin and bends when you step on it. Then when your foot comes off it, it goes ploinnnnng. They don't build right any more. Skimping and trying to save.

But there wasn't a sound. Ethan avoided it. When she thought of it, she realized he had a suspicious amount of skill—the skill of practice.

Ethan was fumbling at the door and she forgot her irritation. She slipped out of bed and swung the door open. He stumbled in against her. "'Mantha, they laughed—"

"Did you have anything to eat?" she broke in.

"Cup of that Mars coffee. But—"

"Don't talk till you get something hot inside. Empty belly, empty head."

"Can't eat stuff that comes out of the wall. I'll wait till breakfast."

She flicked the light on low and punched the selector. She took the glow-plate from under the bed and set it on the table. As the food arrived, she heated it and began adding spices. "There—it ain't real food, but you can pretend."

Ethan pretended and, when the food was gone, wiped his lips and looked at her.

She nodded. "Now you can tell me—but keep your voice low. Don't wake anyone up."

Ethan stretched and creaked. "Went down to the Interplanet office and they wouldn't talk to me. Said there wasn't any ship leaving

for the next ten months and they didn't sell tickets in advance. I kept pestering them and they got mad. They looked up our records and said we couldn't go anytime, except on a fast ship, and, considering our age, it was doubtful they'd let us. Didn't give up, though, and finally they said we might get a release from the man who'd take us. Maybe they wanted to get rid of me. Anyway, they sent me down to talk with one of the pilots."

Amantha approved. Go straight to the man responsible. Persistence could get you there.

"He talked real nice for a while," Ethan continued. "He explained he didn't own the ship and didn't have the say-so who he took. I knew you wanted to go real bad. I offered him the money we'd saved."

"*All* of it, Ethan?"

"Don't get mad. Figured it was worth it to you."

"Don't believe in paying extra," she mused, "but did you tell him we could borrow some if it wasn't enough?"

"Didn't get a chance. He started laughing, saying didn't I understand he got paid not just for each trip, but for all the years after that, when he was finished and had used up his time and couldn't work at the only thing he knew? Saying that he wouldn't risk that kind of security for any money and I was an idiot for believing he might." Ethan trembled.

"Never mind. He's an old fool."

"He's younger than Jimmy."

"Some people get wisdom when they're young."

Ethan sat morosely in the chair. "If Jimmy hadn't made that last trip, he'd be here and he'd have married a girl here and his kids would be here. We wouldn't have to worry about them."

"I guess so, but he was lucky anyway. They found out he wasn't as strong as he was supposed to be and wouldn't let him come back." She began clearing the dishes. "How'd they know he couldn't come back?"

"They got tests. They give them each trip."

She should have thought of it. They had tests. Because of tests, Jimmy was safe but distant. She sat down.

"Tired." Ethan yawned. "Let's go to bed."

"You go. I'm thinking."

Amantha went on thinking while he undressed and lay down. Sometimes it was difficult—things weren't as clear as they used to be. Tonight, though, she had no trouble managing her mind. A woman who had kids had to know her way around things. Presently, she said, "Tomorrow I'm going to bake."

Ethan stirred. "Won't do no good. Didn't say so, but there was a

girl talking to the pilot when I got there. She was crying and begging him to take her to Earth next trip. Said she'd do anything if he would."

"Shame on her!" exclaimed Amantha. "But did it work?"

"She was young and pretty and still he wouldn't pay attention to her," said Ethan. "What chance would you have?"

"I'm going to bake tomorrow. In the morning, we're supposed to go for a walk. We'll take a big basket. Do you remember the old canal nobody goes near any more?"

There was no answer. Ethan was asleep. Now that she'd decided what to do, she lay down beside him.

The sentry huddled in his post. It was insulated and supplied with oxygen, very much like a spacesuit. Though big for a spacesuit, it was a small place to spend hours in without relief. But there were compensations: never anything to do—except as now. He went to the mike.

"Get back," he shouted.

They paid no attention.

Swearing, he shouted again, turning up the volume. Even in the thin air, he had enough sound to blast them off their feet. But they kept on going. He poked the snout of his weapon through the porthole and then withdrew it. Who'd given him those orders anyway? He didn't have to obey them. He clamped on his oxygen helmet and slipped into electric mitts and hurried outside.

"Where do you think you're going?" he demanded, standing in front of them.

"Hello," said Amantha. "Didn't see anyone around."

Damn senior citizens—they never used hearing aids. "You've got

to turn around and go back," he said.

"Why?"

He was shivering and didn't see how they could stand it. Thin clothing and obsolete oxygen equipment. Oddly, they could take more than you'd think, though. Used to it, he supposed. "Come on in," he commanded gruffly. He wasn't going to freeze. They followed him into the post. "Didn't you see the signs to keep out?"

"But the ships aren't using the field. What harm are we doing?"

"Orders," he said. There were still a few pilots checking over their ships, making sure everything was in working condition before they were locked up. In a week, all flight personnel would be gone to the settlements, there to await the next round of voyages when Earth came near. They had it soft, while he, the guard, had to stay in cold discomfort.

"We're going to visit a friend of my son," said Amantha. "They were pilots together. Do you object?"

He didn't, but there were some who would. The order made sense with respect to little boys who would otherwise swarm over the field, falling off ships or getting stuck in rocket tubes.

"What have you got?" he asked, eying Amantha's parcel dubiously.

"I baked something." She opened a corner of the package and the smell drifted out. "Made it with Martian fruit. Not much of it around these days."

He sniffed and became hungry. That was queer—he'd eaten before coming on duty.

"Okay," he said. "You can go. Don't get caught or it's my neck." He stood closer to the old man and woman, and the package, too, and pointed out the window. "Act like you're leaving in case anyone's checking up. When you get near the line of ships, duck behind them and walk along until you find the right one. No one will see you except me."

Amantha pinched the package together. "I'd give you some, but I can't cut it before the pilot sees it."

"I guess you can't," said the sentry wistfully. "Maybe he won't eat all of it."

"May he won't. I'll bring you back what's left—if there *is* any left."

Long after they were gone, the sentry stood there, trying to analyze the indefinable odor. He was still standing there when the checkup squad marched in and arrested him for gross dereliction of duty.

"Go away," said the pilot, disappearing from the viewport. Ethan

pounded on the hull with a rock. The pilot came back, twisting his face. “Stop it. I’ll angle the rocket tubes around and squirt you with them.”

Ethan raised the rock.

“Okay,” said the pilot. “I’ll talk to you, though I know what you want.” Sullenly, he made the hatch swing open. He looked down at them. “All right, let’s hear it.”

“Got a present for you,” said Ethan.

“Not allowed to take bribes unless it’s money.”

“Young man, where are your manners?” snapped Amantha.

“Haven’t got any. It’s the first thing they train out of you.” The pilot started to jerk his head back, saw the rock and decided not to close the hatch. He glanced at the narrow ladder to the ground. “I’ll take your present. Bring it up.”

He stopped smirking as Amantha hitched up her skirts and, holding the package in one hand, swung up the ladder. Agile as goats and probably as sensible, he thought. He took hold of her as she neared the top.

“Grandma, you’re too old to climb around. You’ll break every brittle bone in your body if you fall.”

“Ain’t so brittle,” said Amantha, making way for Ethan who had followed her. “My, it’s cold!” She began shivering. “Invite us in to get warm.”

“You can’t go in. I’m busy. Hey, wait!” The pilot hurried after her into the control compartment.

Amantha was looking around when he arrived. “Cozy but kind of bare,” she said. “Why don’t you hang up pictures?”

“Most fabulous pictures you’ll ever see are right there.”

Amantha followed his glance. “Nothing but Mars. I can see that every day.” She puzzled over it. “Oh, you’re teasing an old woman. I didn’t mean what you see out of the port, stars and planets and such. I’d want a picture of an Indian settin’ on a horse.”

“I’ll bet!” muttered the pilot. “Get warm in a hurry. I’ve got work to do.”

“You just go ahead,” she said. “We’ll set here and toast our toes. We don’t aim to interfere.”

“I’ll stay,” said the pilot hastily. “Let’s have the present.” He’d made a tactical error—he should have ignored the noise that went shimmering through the hull when the old man had pounded with a rock. No, it was nice to think he could have, but impossible. Patience was one of the things the aged did have and the young didn’t.

Amantha set the package down. The pilot scrambled ahead of her and got the navigator’s instruments off the desk and into the drawer.

She opened and displayed the contents.

“I baked it for you,” she said. “It’s a cake.”

He could see what it was. “Hate cake,” he said. “Can’t eat it.”

“You’ll eat this. Canalberry shortcake.”

“Canalberry?” he asked, wrinkling his face. He smelled it and changed expressions in the middle of a wrinkle. Resolutely, he turned away from it and saw Ethan clearly, perhaps for the first time. It was the old man who had tried to bribe him a few days ago. They weren’t as innocent as they seemed. What were they trying to do?

“Ain’t you even going to taste it?” she urged.

He shuddered suspiciously. It smelled good, though he had told the truth about hating the stuff. Under other circumstances, he might have nibbled at a piece for politeness’ sake.

“Can’t. Doctor’s orders.”

“Diabetic? Didn’t think they let them in space-service,” said Amantha. “Funny, it’s the same with Ethan. He can’t eat sweets, either.” She looked at her creation. “Seems a shame to bring it so far to somebody who can’t touch it. Do you mind if I cut myself a slice?”

“Go ahead, Grandma.”

“Amantha,” she corrected him and brought out a knife and two small plates. He wondered if there was any significance. *Two* plates.

She laid a slice on the plate and poked at it with a fork that was also in the package. She put the fork down and picked up the cake.

“It don’t taste right unless you eat it the way it was meant to be,” she said.

He watched her in anguish. His nose quivered and his stomach rumbled. He shouldn’t have let them in.

A crumb fell to the floor and Amantha reached for it. She straightened up, a berry in her hand.

“Canalberries,” she said. “They’re nearly all gone. Used to be you could hardly go anywhere without stepping in them.”

She crushed the berry and the rich aroma swept devastatingly through the air.

“Sure you won’t have some?” she asked, slicing the cake and placing it in front of him. When he finished that, he cut another, and another, until the cake was gone.

The pilot settled logily in a chair and dozed off. Amantha and Ethan watched him in silence.

The pilot got up and began to stretch lazily without seeming to notice them. The laziness disappeared and the stretch changed into a jerk that seemed to elongate his body. He sprang out of the compartment and went leaping down the corridor. When he came to the hatch, he didn’t hesitate. The ladder was too slow. He jumped.

He landed on the sand, sinking in to his knees. He extricated

himself and went bounding over the field.

"Never saw canalberries take so long," muttered Amantha. "Don't know what's wrong. Nothing's as good as it used to be."

She shook off her hat and closed the airlock.

"You don't need those nose plugs any more, Ethan. Come on, let's see if you remember."

Several hours later, she twirled unfamiliar knobs and, by persistence and beginner's luck, managed to get the person she wanted.

"You the commander?" Since he had a harassed look, she assumed he was. "Thought you might be worried about that poor boy."

"Madam, what do you want?" He scowled at the offscreen miscreant who had mistakenly summoned him. "I'm chasing criminals. I haven't got time to chat about old times."

"Don't sass me. I thought you might want to know how to stop that poor boy from running around."

The commander sat down. "What young man?" he asked calculatingly.

"Don't know his name," said Amantha. "He ran out of the ship before we could ask him."

"So *you're* the poisoner," said the commander coldly. "If he dies, neither your age nor your sex will make any difference."

"Just canalberries," Amantha assured him. "Reckon you wouldn't know about them."

"What are you talking about?"

"Canalberries. Used to be lots of them. Males, men and animals, just can't help eating them. Don't bother women or any other kind of females. Biologists used to tell us it was a seed-scattering device. Guess so. Won't hurt him none. Try bicarb and vinegar. It'll fix him up."

"For your sake, I hope it will!" said the commander. "He's in a bad way." He stabbed a pencil at her and his voice became stern. "If you follow directions, I'm sure I can get you off lightly."

"Think we will?" said Amantha.

The commander hurried on. "It's hard to find a ship in space. Stay where you are or, if you can, turn around and come back—*slowly*. We'll send a ship up and transfer a competent pilot to bring you down. Do you hear?"

"Real plain. You got good radios on these ships."

He smothered a growl. "Your lives are in danger. We're not going to chase out and rescue you unless you cooperate." It was an understatement. If they observed radio silence, search ships would

never find them. They might not think of it, but he wouldn't bet. They were smart enough to steal the ship.

There was another thing. From what he'd learned from records, they were close to the exposure limit. Any moment now, they might go berserk, turning their course fatally toward the Sun. He had to be careful what he said.

"We'll get you out of this, but only if you help. I refuse to sacrifice men and waste their flight time, which is more precious than any ship, merely to save two senile incompetents. Is this clear?"

"I suppose," said Amantha. "We've got to go home."

The commander rubbed his hands. They weren't as stubborn as he feared. He'd rescue them.

"Good. I'll have men aloft in a few minutes."

"Guess it was you who didn't hear," she said. "Our home is on Earth."

II

"There's no one here," said the robot blocking the door.

"We'll wait." Amantha tried to go inside. The robot wouldn't move.

It was dark and windy and, from the steps, they could see lights of houses glowing around them. Not many—it was near the edge of the little town. Farther away, over the hill, the ship nestled safely in a valley. No one had seen them land. They were sure of it.

Ethan removed his hat and his bent shoulders straightened. He seemed to grow taller.

"Rain," he said in awe. "Thirty years and yet I haven't forgotten what it's like."

"It's wet, that's what it's like," said Amantha. "Robot, let us in or I'll have Ethan take a wrench to you. He loves to tinker."

"I can't be threatened. My sole concern is the welfare of my charge. Also, I'm too large for any human to hurt me."

"Damnation, I'm soppin'!" complained Ethan. "It's better to remember the rain than to be in it."

"Wait till my son Jimmy gets back. He'll be ravin'. Makin' us stay out here and get soaked."

"Son? Is the Jimmy you refer to Pilot James Huntley?"

"Ex-pilot."

"Correct. But he's not at home. He took his wife to the hospital half an hour ago."

"So soon?" gasped Amantha. "Thought I taught him better than that. Women have got to rest between kids."

"It's not another child," said the robot with disinterest. "It has to do with one of the ills flesh is heir to and machines are not. Nothing serious."

Ethan fidgeted, turning up his collar. Water began flowing from the eaves. "Stop arguin' and let us in. Jimmy will turn off your juice when he finds you've kept his folks outside."

"Folks? He has none here. A mother and father living happily on Mars. They died quite recently, lost in space and plunging into the Sun."

"Make up your mind," Amantha said peevishly. "We ain't on Mars, we weren't happy and we didn't get lost and plunge into the Sun."

"I merely repeat—in sequence—the information I'm given or overhear. If it's inconsistent, so are humans. I'm used to it."

"'Mantha, they think we're dead," said Ethan. He wiped a raindrop away. "Poor Jimmy!"

A thin wail came from a crack in the door. The robot's eyes shone briefly, then dimmed.

"What's that?" asked Amantha. "Sounds like a baby. Thought you said no one was home."

"No responsible adult. Only a child. Because of that, I can admit no one except the parents—or a doctor if I decide one is needed." The robot whirred and drew itself up. "He's absolutely safe. I'm a Sitta."

"You sure are. Now get out of my way before I jab you. The kid's crying."

"He is, but it's no concern of yours. I'm better acquainted with infant behavior than any human can be. The pathetic sob merely means that the child wants attention. I was given no instructions to hold him."

Again the child cried. "Who needs to be told?" demanded Amantha. "Nobody gives grandmothers instructions."

"He's got a grandfather to cuddle him," added Ethan. "How far do you think we came to do it?"

"And he's not cryin' because he wants attention. Something's stickin' him and he's hungry. Don't you think a grandmother would know?"

"There's nothing that can stick him, but if, by accident, something sharp had gotten in his bed and if he were also hungry, he would sound like this." The Sitta hunched down and swiveled its head, giving an imitation. "You see? I do nothing but watch babies. It's built into me."

Inside the house, the child's tone changed, became querulous, listening. Interrogatively, it offered a single yowl.

"My analysis was correct. It wanted attention. The parents left so hurriedly, they forgot to give me permission. When I didn't come to investigate, the child stop—"

The wail burst forth with renewed vigor.

The robot rotated its head and the alert look flashed on and off. It stuttered, "I know w-what I'm doing. But I—I can tell only what has happened to my charge, n-never what *will*!" The Sitta rumbled bewilderedly. "Anticipation is beyond my capacity. The child *is* hurt and hungry. Please come in and help me."

Triumphantly, Amantha followed the robot into the house toward the nursery. She whispered to Ethan, "Sittas ain't smart. I reckon he never heard a bunch of babies together. If one cries, they all do."

The Sitta barred the path. "You seem sincere and are obviously an expert. But before you go in, understand this—attempt no harm to the being in there. I'm linked."

"You'll be unlinked if you don't stop acting balky," warned

Amantha. She ducked under his arm and darted toward the crib.

"By linked, I mean that if anything happens that I require aid to handle, an alarm rings in Sittas Circle and help is on the way. Meanwhile, I can put out fires or carry him unharmed through concrete walls."

"Go ahead, run through a wall," invited Amantha abstractly, snatching up the child. "The darling's wet, too. Fetch me a diaper."

The robot fetched at her command. And when the child was quiet, even cooing, but with a sharp undertone of protest, Amantha settled back. "Now we've got to feed him."

"They didn't give me special instructions and I can't originate. If you hadn't come, I'd have had to contact a doctor."

Amantha handed the child to Ethan. "You hold him." She went into the kitchen.

Ethan tossed the child up. "Here we go," he bellowed. "Free fall. Got to start early to make a spaceman out of you." The Sitta stared at them, puzzled, as the infant shrieked with fear or joy. "Now if only Jimmy was here to see us," said Ethan, grinning proudly.

Jimmy didn't come back soon enough. The police arrived first.

Ethan wandered to the window. The ground was far below. He didn't want to think of what was outside the door.

"Don't mind jail myself—been in a few." He looked at Amantha. "Just for raising hell. Never thought I'd be responsible for putting *you* behind bars."

"It wasn't you," said Amantha, her back straightening. "Curious about it myself." Wisps of hair straggled over her face. "I mean why didn't we think of it on Mars? Didn't we know what they'd do?"

"I guess we didn't." Ethan cracked his knuckles contemplatively.

“Did it occur to you?”

“No. I can’t understand.” She frowned, but it didn’t help clarify what she was thinking about.

“We’re criminals,” said Ethan soberly. “Thieves.”

“I don’t mind for us. Jail’s not much worse than the home for Retired Citizens. It’s our grandson I’m thinking of.”

“Don’t worry. They won’t do a thing to him.” His eyes widened and he wiped off the sweat. “Oh. I see what you mean.”

“Jailbirds,” said Amantha. “We’ll still be in here when he grows up. It’s a fine way to help your kin. They’ll never trust him with us in his family.”

“Jailbirds,” repeated Ethan mournfully. By some magic, his face cracked along the wrinkles and broke into a smile. “But once we flew,” he whispered to himself.

The door opened and an official of some sort came in. Outside, Ethan caught a brief glimpse of guards.

Marlowe, chief training director of space pilots for Interplanet Transport, Inc., walked in silence across the room and eased tiredly into a chair behind the desk. He’d gotten the news late at night, having been the first one contacted. The ship that had been lost had showed up in the atmosphere. There couldn’t be a mistake. No other flight was scheduled for months.

“Follow it,” he had ordered and the trackers had kept it on the screen, flashing a message to the police as soon as they located where it landed. It was logical that it should go where it did, but he didn’t think that anything about this flight was susceptible to a rational approach.

Marlowe’s eyelids felt lined with sand, but that was as nothing compared to his mental irritation. The two oldsters were dead and the ship was vaporized in the Sun. But, of course, it wasn’t true and he had to figure out why.

Others would be here to help him unravel the mystery, from Demarest on down. Meanwhile, he was first. There was a lesson to learn if he could figure out what it was. Damn these senile incompetents.

“Ethan and Amantha Huntley?” he asked. They didn’t fit in with his preconceived picture.

“You the judge?” said Ethan. “I demand to see a lawyer. We’ve got our rights.”

“Why don’t you let our son in?” Amantha protested. “I know he’s been dying to see us. You can’t keep us locked up like this.”

“Please! I’ve just come from a consultation with your son. You’ll see him soon. As for being detained, you’ve been well treated. Most of the time, doctors have been examining you. Isn’t that true?”

“What’s that got to do with it?” challenged Ethan. “Never been sick a day in my life. Sure, my back hurts, and now and then my knees swell up. But it’s nothing. We didn’t ask for a doctor. Got our own on Mars. Young fellow, fifty or sixty.”

Facts contradicted each other. They were what Marlowe expected and yet they weren’t. It was hard to determine. Records showed that if the old couple were not actually senile incompetents, they were close to it. Now that they’d returned the ship in good condition, legal action against them would be dangerous. Everyone had grandparents and knew that they were sometimes foolish. It was a spot to get out of as gracefully as the company could.

It was as training director for Interplanet Transport, however, that he was interested in them.

“You were in space for nearly four months,” he said. “Few people take that much exposure to radiation at one time. We had to determine the state of your health. The evaluation isn’t complete, but I think we can say you’re in no immediate danger.”

Did they understand? It was doubtful. No one else would have stolen the ship and attempted to bring it to Earth. But, damn it, they had done so, landing the ship on the outskirts of the little town, unobserved in the gathering storm.

The facts were painfully fresh in his mind.

“I’d like to know something of your background,” said Marlowe. “What’s your experience with spaceships?”

“Went to Venus in one,” Ethan answered. “Also took a trip to Mars. Stayed there.”

The old man had haunted the control compartment, watching how it was done. Some people did. But that was not a substitute for experience.

“That was long ago and you were a passenger. Anything more recent?”

“Nope. Except for this last trip.”

That was what didn’t make sense.

“Are you sure? Be honest. Check your memory.”

The old man had once piloted jets. But it was not the same.

“No other experience,” said Ethan. “Had training, though.”

Marlowe knew it. Without training, no one could manage takeoff and landing. Somehow, the official search had failed to uncover this vital information. “Where did you take it?”

“Forget the name. Remember every word of it, though.”

Marlowe nodded. It was often the case. Early memories were fresh and clear while later events blew over the enfeebled mind and left no trace. “But you didn’t tell me where.”

"Don't remember that part of it. It was a mighty good course. Wasn't accepted, even though I passed, after paying for my lessons in advance. They said I was too old."

Air lodged in his throat—Marlowe doubled over. If he'd heard rightly…. Good God, there were angels and correspondence courses that watched over the aged! No—give the credit to angels.

"I realized I wasn't as spry as I used to be," continued Ethan seriously. "Can't shoot off a planet or slam down on one the way your pilots do. We were at the far end of the field, quite a ways off. Everybody was busy with the pilot who was running around. They were trying to help him.

"Guess they didn't see us. They'd have laughed if they did. We went up slow, kind of wobbly. But we got off."

The old man was beaming, proud of it. He didn't know it wasn't skill but the built-in safety factor, all the stabilizing mechanisms coming into play at once. Demarest, the chief of construction, had seen to it that the ships were well designed. Marlowe would have to commend him when he got here.

A thought occurred to the training director. If the stabilizing mechanisms were there, why not use them always? Of course, it wasn't that simple. Interplanetary ship stabilizers weren't effective at high speed.

Another thought crowded in. Why such high speed? That was something over which there was no choice. The protective atmosphere had to be left swiftly. The speed was added to at every opportunity. It was possible to slow down only at the last moment. Otherwise….

Otherwise what?

There was no escape from the conclusion—otherwise heredity was altered and mutations would result. Marlowe sat back. This was true without exception. It was the biggest factor that controlled the conditions of interplanetary flight. But—

They'd had their children!

Marlowe's pulse increased. As training director, he'd learned not to leap at things that merely looked good. He had to examine them carefully. But—well, it was a new approach, though he couldn't really expect anything from it. There was more to a crew than a pilot, more to space flight than one incredible lucky voyage, for angels took vacations, too.

"You weren't on duty at all times," Marlowe pointed out. "Then there's navigation."

"Don't sleep much," said Ethan. "Catnap once in a while." He thought it over. "When I did sleep, 'Mantha helped out." He looked at her. "I'm not the expert on navigation. You'd better ask her."

"*No!*" cried Marlowe.

"Why not? Just because I'm a woman?" Her eyes were bright.

"But who taught you navigation?"

Amantha sniffed. "Look here, young man, don't tell me what I can learn." She closed her eyes and imagination carried her back to the ship. "Lots of dials and gadgets—but I used to have near as many in my kitchen before they said I was too old to cook. Anyway, you don't have to figure it out on paper. If you look at things just right, you sort of know where you are."

Amantha folded her hands. "First, you take a big handful of the Sun's attraction and mix it with a bigger scoop of the gravitation of the planet you happen to be on. For us, that was Mars. Then you add a pinch of acceleration. That's what makes you rise. When you get out a ways, you decrease Mars and add more Earth and another pinch of Sun, stirring it around in your mind each day until it feels just right."

She smiled. "I never did hold with too much measuring."

The muscles in Marlowe's chest felt cramped from holding his breath in. While she spoke, he could almost believe she knew what she was doing, that she had a knack for it. Perhaps she did—brief flashes of clarity swept over her senile, beclouded mind. And the same with the old man. These instances of sanity—and luck—had pulled them through.

The ship was back, unharmed. He shouldn't ask for more. And yet—they had made it to Earth.

The chute in the desk clattered noisily and ejected a packet. Marlowe looked at it—it was for him. The full medical report; it had been slow in coming. But this was a small town. The doctor who had looked them over was good, though. Marlowe made certain of that.

He opened the report and read. When he finished, he knew that though luck and angels had been with them on takeoff and part of the passage—along with dimly remembered fragments of unrelated skills that had somehow coalesced into a working knowledge of how to run a ship—it wasn't the whole story. When they landed on Earth, it was no miracle. They had known what they were doing.

"What is it?" asked Ethan. "Habeas corpus?"

"No," said Marlowe. But in one sense it was, though of a kind that no mere judge could return a verdict on. He read the report again.

"No evidence of mental senility," it said in part. "Micro-samples of brain cells seem to be taken from someone about forty or fifty. Physical reactions are slow but firm and consistent. There are puzzling aspects. Certain obscure functions apparently are those of septuagenarians. Others are in keeping with the mental age. The weakest organs govern, of course; they should live another thirty

years, as if they really were in their seventies. However, locomotion and judgment should not be impaired until the very end. Query: Are you sure these are the people I was supposed to examine? I couldn't find that deep, inoperable, though non-malignant tumor the man was supposed to have."

Marlowe folded and refolded the report. Radiation could kill. But it could also cure. It was a standard treatment. But never so drastic and not on the aged for this purpose. He had come at once on two monumental discoveries, both by accident. How many discoveries *were* accidental?

These two wouldn't live longer, but they would have a better life and in full possession of their senses.

"Sure, we borrowed—stole the ship," said Ethan abruptly, interrupting Marlowe's thoughts. "You got it back, but that don't change things. We've got money. We might have enough to pay for most of the fuel."

"It's not necessary. We'll charge it off as an experiment." Marlowe tried to frown. Perhaps he succeeded. "In return for not prosecuting, I want you to abandon your pension and go to work for Interplanet Transport."

Ethan's joints creaked as he sat up eagerly. "Work it off? Sounds fair." There were wrinkles on his face and there never would be any less, but they weren't as deep as they had been, not when they formed the network of a smile. "I can sweep out a ship. Maybe you'd even let me go on a trip once in a while. I could be a cabin boy."

They had been considered useless and incapable for so long that they still didn't realize what he was saying. They weren't childish, but they thought they were. Re-education would have to proceed slowly.

"I had a trip in mind for you," said Marlowe. "And Amantha will have to go to work, too."

"Young man, it's been a long time since I cooked anything but one canalberry shortcake, but you just watch what I can stir up."

"I've got just the place for you," Marlowe answered. "One more stipulation—don't talk about your experiences. If reporters come around, and I think they will, say merely that we traced the ship and, after conferring with you, decided to drop all charges. Understand?"

Amantha nodded. "Look bad for you, wouldn't it? Not guarding the ships any better than that, I mean."

He was thankful their minds had merely been resharpened, that they would never regain their original edge. She was right—it *would* look bad. Also, the company had competitors. And by the time *they* got wind of it, he wanted to have a head-start. Only a few of the aged would fit in with his plans, though the rest would benefit, and by more than a change of status.

Marlowe nodded. “That’s it. Report tomorrow and we’ll go over your assignments.”

“Guess you don’t know what we’re like,” said Ethan. “We’ve hardly seen our littlest grandson yet. What do you suppose we stole—experimented with the ship for?”

Marlowe watched them go and, as the door closed, began to write hurriedly. The others would be here soon. He wanted to have it summarized by the time they arrived.

Half an hour later, he looked at what he’d put down. It was on the back of the medical report.

“Memo: Change the design of our lastest ship. Instead of a heavy-hulled, superfast rocket, requiring the utmost in bodily coordination and stamina, reverse every specification. Permeability to radiation no objection.”

He chuckled. Demarest would threaten to resign. It violated every precept he had ever learned. But the engineer would change his mind when he saw the rest of it.

Marlowe read on: “Top speed need not be high. Emphasis should be placed on safety. Must be maneuverable by operators whose reactive time is not fast, but whose judgment and foresight are trustworthy. Stress simplicity.

“Memo No. 2: Inaugurate another class of service. In addition to fast speedy passages when planets are close, a freight system that can operate continuously is now possible. The planets will open up faster if a steady supply route can be maintained. Older passengers will be a mainstay, especially since therapeutic value is sure to be disclosed. Estimated time to prepare for first run—one year minimum.

“Memo No. 3: Recruiting. Do not overlook the most unlikely skill. It may indicate undisclosed ability of high order.

“Training: Blank. Improvise as you go along!”

Marlowe got up. He thought he heard planes overhead. If so, he had something for them. He’d have to argue, but he felt up to it. The sand had disappeared from his eyes. His step was lighter, too.

And that was because of another item he hadn’t written down. He wouldn’t forget.

He was in the mid-forties and would have to begin learning. It was the awkward age—too old—too young. He couldn’t hope to pilot the murderously fast ships currently in use. And he couldn’t take his place in the clumsy tubs that would soon be swinging between the planets, opening up space to commerce. He would have to wait, but what he learned now would be useful some day. It would be better integrated for having been long buried in his memory.

A vintage aspiration.

When he was immune to the mutating effects of radiation, old and nearly sleepless, he could retire from this career—into a better one.

THE FIRST DAY OF SPRING

By Mari Wolf

Illustrated by Ed Emsh

Here is a love story of two young people who met under the magic of festival time. One was Trina, whose world was a gentle make-believe Earth. The other was Max, handsome spaceman, whose world was the infinite universe of space….

The First Day of spring, the man at the weather tower had said, and certainly it felt like spring, with the cool breeze blowing lightly about her and a faint new clover smell borne in from the east. Spring—that meant they would make the days longer now, and the nights shorter, and they would warm the whole world until it was summer again.

Trina laughed aloud at the thought of summer, with its picnics and languid swims in the refilled lakes, with its music and the heavy scent of flowers and the visitors in from space for the festival. She laughed, and urged her horse faster, out of its ambling walk into a trot, a canter, until the wind streamed about her, blowing back her hair, bringing tears to her eyes as she rode homeward toward the eastern horizon—the horizon that looked so far away but wasn't really.

"Trina!"

His voice was very close. And it was familiar, though for a moment she couldn't imagine who it might be.

"Where are you?" She had reined the horse in abruptly and now looked around her, in all directions, toward the north and south and east and west, toward the farm houses of the neighboring village, toward the light tower and the sun tower. She saw no one. No one else rode this early in the day in the pasture part of the world.

"I'm up here, Trina."

She looked up then and saw him, hovering some thirty feet off the ground in the ridiculous windmill-like craft he and his people used when they visited the world.

"Oh, hello, Max." No wonder she had known the voice. Max Cramer, down from space, down to the world, to see her. She knew, even before he dropped his craft onto the grass beside her, that he had come to see her. He couldn't have been on the world for more than the hour she'd been riding.

"You're visiting us early this year, Max. It's not festival time for three months yet."

"I know." He cut the power to the windmill blades, and they slowed, becoming sharply visible. The horse snorted and backed away. Max smiled. "This world is very—attractive."

His eyes caught hers, held them. She smiled back, wishing for the hundredth time since last summer's festival that he were one of her people, or at least a worldling, and not a man with the too white skin of space.

"It may be attractive," she said. "But you always leave it soon enough."

He nodded. "It's too confining. It's all right, for a little while, but then…."

"How can you say that?" She shook her head sadly. Already they were arguing the same old unresolvable argument, and they had scarcely greeted each other. After all his months in space they met with the same words as they had parted. She looked past him, up and out, toward the horizon that seemed so many miles away, toward the morning sun that seemed to hang far, far off in the vaulted blue dome of the sky.

"How can you even think it? About this?"

His lips tightened. "About *this*," he repeated. "A horizon you could ride to in five minutes. A world you could ride around in two hours. A sun—you really call it a sun—that you could almost reach up and pluck out of that sky of yours." He laughed. "Illusions. World of illusions."

"Well, what do you have? A ship—a tiny ship you can't get out of, with walls you can see, all around you."

"Yes, Trina, with walls we can see."

He was still smiling, watching her, and she knew that he desired her. And she desired him. But not the stars.

"You have nothing like this," she said, knowing it wouldn't do any good. She looked past him at the light tower, one of the many that formed the protective screen about her world, that made it seem great and convex, a huge flattened sphere with the sun high above,

and not the swift curving steel ball that it actually was.

This was her world. It was like Earth, like the old Earth of the legends of the time before the radiation wars. And even though her mind might know the truth about the screens that refracted light and the atomic pile that was her sun, her heart knew a more human truth. This was a world. As it had been in the beginning. As it must be till the end—or until they found a new Earth, somewhere, sometime…. Max sighed. "Yes, you have your world, Trina. And it's a good one—the best of its kind I've ever visited."

"Why don't you stay here then?"

A spaceman, she thought. With all the dozens of men in my world, why did it have to be a spaceman? With all the visitors from New France and New Chile and New Australia last festival, why did it have to be him?

"I have the stars, Trina."

"We do too!" Last festival, and the warm June night, heavy, druggedly heavy with honeysuckle and magnolia, and the hidden music from the pavillions. And Max Cramer, tall and strong boned and alien, holding her in his arms, dancing her away from her people, out onto the terrace above the little stream, beneath the full festival moon and the summer stars, the safe, sane, well ordered constellations that their ancestors had looked upon from Earth.

"My stars are real, Trina."

She shook her head, unable to argue with him. World-woman and spaceman, and always different, with nothing in common between them, really, except a brief forgetfulness at festival time.

"Come with me, Trina."

"No." She gathered up the reins and chucked at the horse and turned, slowly, for the village.

"You wouldn't come—for me?"

"You wouldn't stay, would you?"

She heard the windmill blades whir again, and a rustling of wind, and then he was beside her, skimming slowly along, barely off the ground, making her horse snort nervously away.

"Trina, I shouldn't tell you this, not until we've met with your councilmen. But I—I've got to."

He wasn't smiling now. There was a wild look about his face. She didn't like it.

"Captain Bernard's with the council now, giving them the news. But I wanted to see you first, to be the one who told you." He broke off, shook his head. "Yet when I found you I couldn't say anything. I guess I was afraid of what you'd answer…."

"What are you talking about?" She didn't want to look at him. It embarrassed her somehow, seeing him so eager. "What do you want

to tell me?"

"About our last trip, Trina. We've found a world!"

She stared at him blankly, and his hand made a cutting gesture of impatience. "Oh, not a world like this one! A planet, Trina. And it's Earth type!"

She wheeled the horse about and stared at him. For a moment she felt excitement rise inside of her too, and then she remembered the generations of searching, and the false alarms, and the dozens of barren, unfit planets that the spacemen colonized, planets like ground-bound ships.

"Oh, Trina," Max cried, "This isn't like the others. It's a new Earth. And there are already people there. From not long after the Exodus…."

"A new Earth?" she said. "I don't believe it."

The council wouldn't either, she thought. Not after all the other new Earths, freezing cold or methane atmosphered or at best completely waterless. This would be like the others. A spaceman's dream.

"You've got to believe me, Trina," Max said. "And you've got to help make the others believe. Don't you see? You wouldn't live in space. I wouldn't live here—on this. But there, on a real planet, on a real Earth…."

Then suddenly she felt his excitement and it was a part of her, until against all reason she wanted to believe in his mad dream of a world. She laughed aloud as she caught up the reins and raced her horse homeward, toward the long vista of the horizon and the capital village beyond it, ten minutes gallop away.

Max and Trina came together into the council hall and saw the two groups, the roomful of worldmen and the half dozen spacemen, apart from each other, arguing. The spacemen's eyes were angry.

"A world," Captain Bernard said bitterly, "there for your taking, and you don't even want to look at it."

"How do we know what kind of world it is?" Councilman Elias leaned forward on the divan. His voice was gentle, almost pitying. "You brought no samples. No vegetation, no minerals…."

"Not even air samples," Aaron Gomez said softly. "Why?"

Bernard sighed. "We didn't want to wait," he said. "We wanted to get back here, to tell you."

"It may be a paradise world to *you*," Elias said. "But to us…."

Max Cramer tightened his grip on Trina's hand. "The fools," he said. "Talking and talking, and all the time this world drifts farther and farther away."

"It takes so much power to change course," Trina said. "And besides, you feel it. It makes you heavy."

She remembered the stories her father used to tell, about his own youth, when he and Curt Elias had turned the world to go to a planet the spaceman found. A planet with people—people who lived under glass domes, or deep below the formaldehyde poisoned surface.

"You could be there in two weeks, easily, even at your world's speed," Captain Bernard said.

"And then we'd have to go out," Elias said. "Into space."

The worldmen nodded. The women looked at each other and nodded too. One of the spacemen swore, graphically, and there was an embarrassed silence as Trina's people pretended not to have heard.

"Oh, let's get out of here." The spaceman who had sworn swore again, just as descriptively, and then grinned at the councilmen and their aloof, blank faces. "They don't want our planet. All right. Maybe New Chile…."

"Wait!" Trina said it without thinking, without intending to. She stood speechless when the others turned to face her. All the others. Her people and Max's. Curt Elias, leaning forward again, smiling at her.

"Yes, Trina?" the councilman said.

"Why don't we at least look at it? Maybe it is—what they say."

Expression came back to their faces then. They nodded at each other and looked from her to Max Cramer and back again at her, and they smiled. Festival time, their eyes said. Summer evenings, summer foolishness.

And festival time long behind them, but soon to come again.

"Your father went to space," Elias said. "We saw one of those worlds the spacemen talk of."

"I know."

"He didn't like it."

"I know that too," she said, remembering his bitter words and the nightmare times when her mother had had so much trouble comforting him, and the winter evenings when he didn't want even to go outside and see the familiar, Earth encircling stars.

He was dead now. Her mother was dead now. They were not here, to disapprove, to join with Elias and the others.

They would have hated for her to go out there.

She faltered, the excitement Max had aroused in her dying away, and then she thought of their argument, as old as their desire. She knew that if she wanted him it would have to be away from the worlds.

"At least we could look," she said. "And the spacemen could bring up samples. And maybe even some of the people for us to talk to."

Elias nodded. "It would be interesting," he said slowly, "to talk to some new people. It's been so long."

“And we wouldn’t even have to land,” Aaron Gomez said, “if it didn’t look right.”

The people turned to each other again and smiled happily. She knew that they were thinking of the men and women they would see, and all the new things to talk about.

“We might even invite some of them up for the festival,” Elias said slowly. “Providing they’re—courteous.” He frowned at the young spaceman who had done the swearing, and then he looked back at Captain Bernard. “And providing, of course, that we’re not too far away by then.”

“I don’t think you will be,” Bernard said. “I think you’ll stay.”

“I think so too,” Max Cramer said, moving closer to Trina. “I hope so.”

Elias stood up slowly and signalled that the council was dismissed. The other people stood up also and moved toward the doors.

“We’d better see about changing the world’s course,” Aaron Gomez said.

No one objected. It was going to be done. Trina looked up at Max Cramer and knew that she loved him. And wondered why she was afraid.

It was ten days later that the world, New America, came into the gravitational influence of the planet’s solar system. The automatic deflectors swung into functioning position, ready to change course, slowly and imperceptibly, but enough to take the world around the system and out into the freedom of space where it could wander on its random course. But this time men shunted aside the automatic controls. Men guided their homeland in, slowly now, toward the second planet from the sun, the one that the spacemen had said was so like Earth.

“We’ll see it tomorrow,” Trina said. “They’ll shut off part of the light tower system then.”

“Why don’t they now?” Max Cramer asked her. It was just past sunset, and the stars of a dozen generations ago were just beginning to wink into view. He saw Venus, low on the horizon, and his lips tightened, and then he looked up to where he knew the new sun must be.

There was only the crescent of Earth’s moon.

“Now?” Trina said. “Why should they turn the screens off now? We’re still so far away. We wouldn’t see anything.”

“You’d see the sun,” Max said. “It’s quite bright, even from here. And from close up, from where the planet is, it looks just about like Earth’s.”

Trina nodded. “That’s good,” she said, looking over at the rose tints of the afterglow. “It wouldn’t seem right if it didn’t.”

A cow lowed in the distance, and nearer, the laughing voices of children rode the evening breeze. Somewhere a dog barked. Somewhere else a woman called her family home to supper. Old sounds. Older, literally, than this world.

“What are the people like, out there?”

He looked at her face, eager and worried at the same time, and he smiled. “You’ll like them, Trina,” he said. “They’re like—well, they’re more like *this* than anything else.”

He gestured, vaguely, at the farmhouse lights ahead of them, at the slow walking figures of the young couples out enjoying the warm spring evening, at the old farmer leading his plow horse home along the path.

“They live in villages, not too different, from yours. And in cities. And on farms.”

“And yet, you like it there, don’t you?” she said.

He nodded. “Yes, I like it there.”

“But you don’t like it here. Why?”

“If you don’t understand by now, Trina, I can’t explain.”

They walked on. Night came swiftly, crowding the rose and purple tints out of the western sky, closing in dark and cool and sweet smelling about them. Ahead, a footbridge loomed up out of the shadows. There was the sound of running water, and, on the bank not far from the bridge, the low murmuring of a couple of late lingering fishermen.

“The people live out in the open, like this?” Trina said.

“Yes.”

“Not underground? Not under a dome?”

“I’ve told you before that it’s like Earth, Trina. About the same size, even.”

“*This* is about the same size, too.”

“Not really. It only looks that way.”

The fishermen glanced up as they passed, and then bent down over their lines again. Lucas Crossman, from Trina’s town, and Jake Krakorian from the southern hemisphere, up to visit his sister Lucienne, who had just had twins….

Trina said hello to them as she passed, and found out that the twins looked just like their mother, except for Grandfather Mueller’s eyes, and then she turned back to Max.

“Do people live all over the planet?”

“On most of it. The land sections, that is. Of course, up by the poles it’s too cold.”

“But how do they know each other?”

He stopped walking and stared at her, not understanding for a minute. Girl's laughter came from the bushes, and the soft urging voice of one of the village boys. Max looked back at the fishermen and then down at Trina and shook his head.

"They don't all know each other," he said. "They couldn't."

She thought of New Chile, where her cousin Isobelle was married last year, and New India, which would follow them soon to the planet, because Captain Bernard had been able to contact them by radio. She thought of her people, her friends, and then she remembered the spacemen's far flung ships and the homes they burrowed deep in the rock of inhospitable worlds. She knew that he would never understand why she pitied the people of this system.

"I suppose we'll see them soon," she said. "You're going to bring some of them back up in your ship tomorrow, aren't you?"

He stood quietly, looking down at her. His face was shadowed in the gathering night and his whole body was in shadow, tall and somehow alien seeming there before her.

"Why wait for them to come here, Trina?" he said. "Come down with us, in the ship, tomorrow. Come down and see for yourself what it's like."

She trembled. "No," she said.

And she thought of the ship, out away from the sky, not down on the planet yet but hanging above it, with no atmosphere to break the blackness, to soften the glare of the planet's sun, to shut out the emptiness.

"You'd hardly know you weren't here, Trina. The air smells the same. And the weight's almost the same too. Maybe a little lighter."

She nodded. "I know. If we land the world, I'll go out there. But not in the ship."

"All right." He sighed and let go his grip on her shoulders and turned to start walking back the way they had come, toward the town.

She thought suddenly of what he had just said, that she would hardly be able to tell the difference.

"It can't be so much like this," she said. "Or you couldn't like it. No matter what you say."

"Trina." His voice was harsh. "You've never been out in space, so you couldn't understand. You just don't know what your world is like, from outside, when you're coming in."

But she could picture it. A tiny planetoid, shining perhaps behind its own screens, a small, drifting, lonely sphere of rock. She trembled again. "I don't want to know," she said.

Somewhere in the meadows beyond the road there was laughter, a boy and a girl laughing together, happy in the night. Trina's fingers tightened on Max's hand and she pulled him around to face her and

then clung to him, trembling, feeling the nearness of him as she held up her face to be kissed.

He held her to him. And slowly, the outside world of space faded, and her world seemed big and solid and sure, and in his arms it was almost like festival time again.

At noon the next day the world slowed again and changed course, going into an orbit around the planet, becoming a third moon, nearer to the surface than the others.

The people, all of those who had followed their normal day-to-day life even after New America came into the system, abandoned it at last. They crowded near the television towers, waiting for the signal which would open up some of the sky and show them the planet they circled, a great green disk, twice the apparent diameter of the legendary Moon of Earth.

Max stood beside Trina in the crowd that pressed close about his ship. He wore his spaceman's suit, and the helmet was in his hand. Soon he too would be aboard with the others, going down to the planet.

"You're sure you won't come, Trina? We'll be down in a couple of hours."

"I'll wait until we land there. If we do."

Curt Elias came toward them through the crowd. When he saw Trina he smiled and walked faster, almost briskly. It was strange to see him move like a young and active man.

"If I were younger," he said, "I'd go down there." He smiled again and pointed up at the zenith, where the blue was beginning to waver and fade as the sky screens slipped away. "This brings back memories."

"You didn't like that other world," Trina said. "Not any more than Father did."

"The air was bad there," Elias said.

The signal buzzer sounded again. The center screens came down. Above them, outlined by the fuzzy halo of the still remaining sky, the black of space stood forth, and the stars, and the great disk of the planet, with its seas and continents and cloud masses and the shadow of night creeping across it from the east.

"You see, Trina?" Max said softly.

The voices of the people rose, some alive with interest and others anxious, fighting back the planet and the unfamiliar, too bright stars. Trina clutched Max Cramer's hand, feeling again the eagerness of that first day, when he had come to tell her of this world.

"You're right," she whispered. "It *is* like Earth."

It was so much like the pictures, though of course the continents

were different, and the seas, and instead of one moon there were two. Earth. A new Earth, there above them in the sky.

Elias let out his breath slowly. "Yes," he said. "It is. It's not a bit like that world we visited. Not a bit."

"When you're down there it's even more like Earth," Max said. "And all the way down you could watch it grow larger. It wouldn't be at all like open space."

At the poles of the planet snow gleamed, and cloud masses drifted across the equator. And the people looked, and pointed, their voices growing loud with eagerness.

"Why don't we land the world now?" Trina cried. "Why wait for the ship to bring people up here?"

"Landing the world would take a lot of power," Elias said. "It would be foolish to do it unless we planned on staying for quite a while." He sighed. "Though I would like to go down there. I'd like to see a really Earth type planet."

He looked at Max, and Max smiled. "Well, why not?" he said.

Elias smiled too. "After all, I've been in space once. I'll go again." He turned and pushed his way through the people.

Trina watched him go. Somehow he seemed a symbol to her. Old and stable, he had been head of the council since she was a child. And he had gone into space with her father….

"Please come, Trina," Max said. "There's nothing to be afraid of."

With both Max and Elias along, certainly it couldn't be too bad. Max was right. There was nothing, really, to be afraid of. She smiled up at him.

"All right," she said. "I'll go."

And then she was walking with Max Cramer toward the ship and trying not to remember her father crying in his sleep.

The ship rose, and Trina cried out as she felt the heaviness wrench her back against the cushions. Max reached over to her. She felt the needle go into her arm again, and then sank back into the half sleep that he had promised would last until they were ready to land.

When she awoke the planet was a disk no longer, but a great curving mass beneath the ship, with the mountains and valleys and towns of its people plainly visible. But the planet's sky still lay below, and around them, in every direction except down, space stretched out, blacker than any night on the world. The world. Trina moaned and closed her eyes, glad she hadn't seen it, somewhere tiny and insignificant behind them.

Max heard her moan and reached toward her. She slept again, and woke only when they were down and he was tugging the straps loose from around her. She sat up, still numbed by the drug, still half

asleep and unreal feeling, and looked out about her at the planet's surface.

They were in a field of some sort of grain. Beyond the scorched land where they had come down the tall cereal grasses rippled in the soft wind, a great undulating sea of green, reaching out toward the far off hills and the horizon. Cloud shadows drifted across the fields, and the shadow of the ship reached out to meet them.

Trina rubbed her eyes in wonder.

"It *is* like the world," she said. "Just like it."

For a moment she was sure that they were back on the world again, in some momentarily unrecognized pasture, or perhaps on one of the sister worlds. Then, looking along the row of hills to where they dropped away into an extension of the plain, she saw that the horizon was a little too far, and that the light shimmered differently, somehow, than on her home. But it was such a little difference.

"Come on outside," Max Cramer said. "You'll be all right now."

She stood up and followed him. Elias was already at the airlock, moving unsteadily and a little blankly, also still partly under the influence of the narcotic.

The lock opened. Captain Bernard stepped out and went down the ladder to the ground. The others followed him. Within a few minutes the ship stood empty.

Trina breathed the open air of the planet and felt the warmth on her face and smelled the scent of grass and the elusive fragrance of alien flowers. She heard the song of some strange, infinitely sweet throated bird.

"It's—it's Earth," she whispered.

Voices, eager, calling voices, sang out in the distance. Then, little cars rolled toward them through the field, mowing down the grass, cutting themselves a path to the ship. People, men and women and children, were calling greetings.

"This is where we landed before," Max said. "We told them we'd be back."

They were sunbronzed, country people, and except for their strange clothing they might have been from any of the worlds. Even their language was the same, though accented differently, with some of the old, unused words, like those in the legends.

"You've brought your people?" the tall man who stood in the forefront said to Captain Bernard.

"They're up there." Bernard pointed up at the sky, and the people looked up. Trina looked up too. One of the planet's moons was almost full overhead. But the world was invisible, shut off by the sky and the clouds and the light of the earthlike sun.

“They’d like some of you to come visit their world,” Bernard said. “If any of you are willing.”

The tall man nodded. “Everyone will want to go,” he said. “Very few ships ever land here. Until you came, it had been years.”

“You’d go out in space?” Trina said incredulously.

Again the man nodded. “I was a spaceman once,” he said. “All of us MacGregors were.” Then he sighed. “Sometimes even now I want to go out again. But there’ve been no ships here, not for years.”

Trina looked past him, at the women and the children, at the lush fields and the little houses far in the distance. “You’d leave this?”

MacGregor shook his head. “No, of course not. Not to live in space permanently. I’d always come back.”

“It’s a fine world to come back to,” Max said, and he and the tall man smiled at each other, as if they shared something that Trina couldn’t possibly understand.

“We might as well go into town,” MacGregor said.

They walked over to the cars. MacGregor stopped beside one of them, his hand on the door button.

“Here, let me drive.” The girl stepped forward out of the crowd as she spoke. She was tall, almost as tall as MacGregor, and she had the same high cheekbones and the same laughter lines about her eyes.

“Not this time, Saari,” MacGregor said. “This time you can entertain our guests.” He turned to Max and Trina and smiled. “My daughter.” His face was proud.

They climbed in, Trina wedging herself into the middle of the back seat between Max and the planet girl. The car throbbed into motion, then picked up speed, jolting a bit on the rough country road. The ground rushed past and the fields rushed past and Trina leaned against Max and shut her eyes against the dizzying speed. Here, close to the ground, so close that they could feel every unevenness of its surface, it was far worse than in the windmill like craft the spacemen used on the worlds.

“Don’t you have cars?” Saari asked.

“No,” Trina said. “We don’t need them.”

A car like this would rush all the way around the world in half an hour. In a car like this one even the horizons wouldn’t look right, rushing to meet them. Here, though the horizons stayed the same, unmoving while the fence posts and the farmhouses and the people flashed past.

“What do you use for transportation then?”

“We walk,” Trina said, opening her eyes to look at the girl and then closing them again. “Or we ride horses.”

“Oh.”

A few minutes later the car slowed, and Trina opened her eyes

again.

"We're coming into town," Saari said.

They had climbed up over the brow of a small hill and were now dropping down. At the bottom of the hill the houses clumped together, sparsely at first, then more and more of them, so that the whole valley was filled with buildings, and more buildings hugged the far slopes.

"There are so many of them," Trina whispered.

"Oh, no, Trina. This is just a small town."

"But the people—all those people…."

They crowded the streets, watching the cars come in, looking with open curiosity at their alien visitors. Faces, a thousand faces, all different and yet somehow all alike, blended together into a great anonymous mass.

"There aren't half that many people on the whole world," Trina said.

Saari smiled. "Just wait till you see the city."

Trina shook her head and looked up at Max. He was smiling out at the town, nodding to some men he apparently knew, with nothing but eagerness in his face. He seemed a stranger. She looked around for Curt Elias, but he was in one of the other cars cut off from them by the crowd. She couldn't see him at all.

"Don't you like it?" Saari said.

"I liked it better where we landed."

Max turned and glanced down at her briefly, but his hand found hers and held it, tightly, until her own relaxed. "If you want to, Trina, we can live out there, in those fields."

For a moment she forgot the crowd and the endless faces as she looked up at him. "Do you mean that, Max? We could really live out there?"

Where it was quiet, and the sun was the same, and the birds sang sweetly just before harvest time, where she would have room to ride and plenty of pasture for her favorite horse. Where she would have Max, there with her, not out somewhere beyond the stars.

"Certainly we could live there," he said. "That's what I've been saying all along."

"You could settle down here?"

He laughed. "Oh, I suppose I'd be out in space a good deal of the time," he said. "The ships will come here now, you know. But I'll always come home, Trina. To this world. To you."

And suddenly it didn't matter that the girl beside her chuckled, nor that there were too many people crowding around them, all talking at once in their strangely accented voices. All that mattered was Max, and this world, which was real after all, and a life that

seemed like an endless festival time before her.

Evening came quickly, too quickly, with the sun dropping in an unnatural plunge toward the horizon. Shadows crept out from the houses of the town, reached across the narrow street and blended with the walls of the houses opposite. The birds sang louder in the twilight, the notes of their song drifting in from the nearby fields. And there was another sound, that of the wind, not loud now but rising, swirling fingers of dust in the street.

Trina sat in front of the town cafe with the planet girl, Saari. Max Cramer was only a few feet away, but he paid no attention to her, and little to Elias. He was too busy telling the planet people about space.

"Your man?" Saari asked.

"Yes," Trina said. "I guess so."

"You're lucky." Saari looked over at Max and sighed, and then she turned back to Trina. "My father was a spaceman. He used to take my mother up, when they were first married, when the ships were still running." She sighed. "I remember the ships, a little. But it was such a long time ago."

"I can't understand you people." Trina shook her head. "Leaving all of this, just to go out in space."

The room was crowded, oppressively crowded. Outside, too many people walked the shadowed streets. Too many voices babbled together. The people of this planet must be a little mad, Trina thought, to live cooped together as the spacemen lived, with all their world around them.

Saari sat watching her, and nodded. "You're different, aren't you? From us, and from them too." She looked over at Max and Bernard and the others, and then she looked at Curt Elias, who sat clenching and unclenching his hands, saying nothing.

"Yes, we're different," Trina said.

Max Cramer's voice broke incisively into the silence that lay between them then. "I don't see why," he said, "we didn't all know about this world. Especially if more than one ship came here."

Saari's father laughed softly. "It's not so strange. The ships all belonged to one clan. The MacGregors. And eventually all of them either were lost in space somewhere or else grew tired of roaming around and settled down. Here." He smiled again, and his high cheekboned face leaned forward into the light. "Like me…."

Night. Cloudless, black, but hazed over with atmosphere and thus familiar, not like the night of space. The two small moons, the stars in unfamiliar places, and somewhere, a star that was her world. And Trina sat and listened to the planet men talk, and to the spacemen among them who could no longer be distinguished from the native

born. Outside, in the narrow street, wind murmured, skudding papers and brush before it, vague shadows against the light houses. Wind, rising and moaning, the sound coming in over the voices and the music from the cafe singers.

It was a stronger wind than ever blew on the world, even during the winter, when the people had to stay inside and wish that Earth tradition might be broken and good weather be had the year around.

"We'd better get back to the ship," Elias said.

They stopped talking and looked at him, and he looked down at his hands, embarrassed. "They'll be worried about us at home."

"No, they won't," Max said. Then he saw the thin, blue-veined hands trembling and the quiver not quite controlled in the wrinkled neck. "Though perhaps we should start back…."

Trina let out her breath in relief. To be back in the ship, she thought, with the needle and its forgetfulness, away from the noise and the crowd and the nervousness brought on by the rising wind.

It would be better, of course, when they had their place in the country. There it would be warm and homelike and quiet, with the farm animals near by, and the weather shut out, boarded out and forgotten, the way it was in winter on the world.

"You're coming with us?" Captain Bernard was saying.

"Yes, we're coming." Half a dozen of the men stood up and began pulling on their long, awkward coats.

"It'll be good to get back in space again," MacGregor said. "For a while." He smiled. "But I'm too old for a spaceman's life now."

"And I'm too old even for this," Elias said apologetically. "If we'd found this planet the other time…." He sighed and shook his head and looked out the window at the shadows that were people, bent forward, walking into the wind. He sighed again. "I don't know. I just don't know."

Saari got up and pulled on her wrap too. Then she walked over to one of the other women, spoke to her a minute, and came back carrying a quilted, rough fabricked coat. "Here, Trina, you'd better put this on. It'll be cold out."

"Are you going with us?"

"Sure. Why not? Dad's talked enough about space. I might as well see what it's like for myself."

Trina shook her head. But before she could speak, someone opened the door and the cold breeze came in, hitting her in the face.

"Come on," Saari said. "It'll be warm in the car."

Somehow she was outside, following the others. The wind whipped her hair, stung her eyes, tore at her legs. The coat kept it from her body, but she couldn't protect her face, nor shut out the low moaning wail of it through the trees and the housetops.

She groped her way into the car. The door slammed shut, and the wind retreated, a little.

"Is it—is it often like that?"

Saari MacGregor looked at her. Max Cramer turned and looked at her, and so did the others in the car. For a long moment no one said anything. And then Saari said, "Why, this is *summer*, Trina."

"Summer?" She thought of the cereal grasses, rippling in the warm day. They'd be whipping in the wind now, of course. The wind that was so much stronger than any the world's machines ever made.

"You ought to be here in winter," Saari was saying. "It really blows then. And there are the rainstorms, and snow…."

"Snow?" Trina said blankly.

"Certainly. A couple of feet of it, usually." Saari stopped talking and looked at Trina, and surprise crept even farther into her face. "You mean you don't have snow on your world?"

"Why, yes, we have snow. We have everything Earth had." But snow two feet deep… Trina shivered, thinking of winter on the world, and the soft dusting of white on winter mornings, the beautiful powdery flakes cool in the sunlight.

"They have about a sixteenth of an inch of it," Max said. "And even that's more than some of the worlds have. It hardly ever even rains in New California."

Saari turned away finally, and the others did too. The car started, the sound of its motors shutting out the wind a little, and then they were moving. Yet it was even more frightening, rushing over the roads in the darkness, with the houses flashing past and the trees thrashing in the wind and the people briefly seen and then left behind in the night.

The ship was ahead. The ship. Now even it seemed a safe, familiar place.

"This isn't like Earth after all," Trina said bitterly. "And it seemed so beautiful at first."

Then she saw that Saari MacGregor was looking at her again, but this time more in pity than in surprise.

"Not like Earth, Trina? You're wrong. We have a better climate than Earth's. We never have blizzards, nor hurricanes, and it's never too cold nor too hot, really."

"How can you say that?" Trina cried. "We've kept *our* world like Earth. Oh, maybe we've shortened winter a little, but still…."

Saari's voice was sad and gentle, as if she were explaining something to a bewildered child. "My mother's ancestors came here only a few years out from Earth," she said. "And do you know what they called this planet? A paradise. A garden world."

"That's why they named it Eden," Max Cramer said.

Then they were at the ship, out of the car, running to the airlock, with the grass lashing at their legs and the wind lashing at their faces and the cold night air aflame suddenly in their lungs. And Trina couldn't protest any longer, not with the world mad about her, not with Saari's words ringing in her ears like the wind.

She saw them carry Curt Elias in, and then Max was helping her aboard, and a moment later, finally, the airlock doors slipped shut and it was quiet.

She held out her arm for the needle.

When she awoke again it was morning. Morning on the world. They had carried her to one of the divans in the council hall, one near a window so that she could see the familiar fields of her homeland as soon as she awoke. She rubbed her eyes and straightened and looked up at the others. At Elias, still resting on another divan. At Captain Bernard. At Saari and her father, and another man from the planet. At Max.

He looked at her, and then sighed and turned away, shaking his head.

"Are we—are we going back there?" Trina asked.

"No," Elias said. "The people are against it."

There was silence for a moment, and then Elias went on. "I'm against it. I suppose that even if I'd been young I wouldn't have wanted to stay." His eyes met Trina's, and there was pity in them.

"No," Max said. "You wouldn't have wanted to."

"And yet," Elias said, "I went down there. Trina went down there. Her father and I both went out into space." He sighed. "The others wouldn't even do that."

"You're not quite as bad, that's all," Max said bluntly. "But I don't understand any of you. None of us ever has understood you. None of us ever will."

Trina looked across at him. Her fingers knew every line of his face, but now he was withdrawn, a stranger. "You're going back there, aren't you?" she said. And when he nodded, she sighed. "We'll never understand you either, I guess."

She remembered Saari's question of the night before, "Is he your man?" and she realized that her answer had not been the truth. She knew now that he had never been hers, not really, nor she his, that the woman who would be his would be like Saari, eager and unafraid and laughing in the wind, or looking out the ports at friendly stars.

Elias leaned forward on the divan and gestured toward the master weather panel for their part of the village, the indicators that told what it was like today and what it would be like tomorrow all over the world. "I think I understand," he said. "I think I know what we did

to our environment, through the generations. But it doesn't do much good, just knowing something."

"You'll never change," Max said.

"No, I don't think we will."

Captain Bernard got up, and MacGregor got up too. They looked at Max. Slowly he turned his head and smiled at Trina, and then he too stood up. "Want to come outside and talk, Trina?"

But there was nothing to say. Nothing she could do except break down and cry in his arms and beg him not to leave her, beg him to spend the rest of his life on a world she could never leave again.

"No," she said. "I guess not." And then, the memories rushed back, and the music, and the little lane down by the stream where the magnolias spread their web of fragrance. "It's—it's almost festival time, Max. Will you be here for it?"

"I don't know, Trina."

It meant no; she knew that.

The weeks slipped by, until it was summer on the world, until the festival music sang through the villages and the festival flowers bloomed and the festival lovers slipped off from the dances to walk among them. There was a breeze, just enough to carry the mingled fragrances and the mingled songs, just enough to touch the throat and ruffle the hair and lie lightly between the lips of lovers.

Trina danced with Aaron Gomez, and remembered. And the wind seemed too soft somehow, almost lifeless, with the air too sweet and cloying.

She wondered what a festival on the planet would be like.

Max, with Saari MacGregor, perhaps, laughing in the wind, running in the chill of evening along some riverbank.

I could have gone with him, she thought. I could have gone….

But then the music swirled faster about them, the pulse of it pounding in her ears, and Aaron swept her closer as they danced, spinning among the people and the laughter, out toward the terrace, toward the trees with leaves unstirring in the evening air. All was color and sound and scent, all blended, hypnotically perfect, something infinitely precious that she could never, never leave.

For it was summer on the world, and festival time again.

THE VICTOR
By Bryce Walton
Illustrated by Kelly Freas

Under the new system of the Managerials, the fight was not for life but for death! And great was the ingenuity of—The Victor.

Charles Marquis had a fraction of a minute in which to die. He dropped through the tubular beams of alloydem steel and hung there, five thousand feet above the tiers and walkways below. At either end of the walkway crossing between the two power-hung buildings, he saw the plainclothes security officers running in toward him.

He grinned and started to release his grip. He would think about them on the way down. His fingers wouldn't work. He kicked and strained and tore at himself with his own weight, but his hands weren't his own any more. He might have anticipated that. Some paralysis beam freezing his hands into the metal.

He sagged to limpness. His chin dropped. For an instant, then, the fire in his heart almost went out, but not quite. It survived that one terrible moment of defeat, then burned higher. And perhaps something in that desperate resistance was the factor that kept it burning where it was thought no flame could burn. He felt the rigidity of paralysis leaving his arms as he was lifted, helped along the walkway to a security car.

The car looked like any other car. The officers appeared like all the other people in the clockwork culture of the mechanized New System. Marquis sought the protection of personal darkness behind closed eyelids as the monorail car moved faster and faster through the high clean air. Well—he'd worked with the Underground against the System for a long time. He had known that eventually he would be caught. There were rumors of what happened to men then, and even the vaguest, unsubstantiated rumors were enough to indicate that death was preferable. That was the Underground's philosophy—better to die standing up as a man with some degree of personal integrity and freedom than to go on living as a conditioned slave of the state.

He'd missed—but he wasn't through yet though. In a hollow tooth was a capsule containing a very high-potency poison. A little of that would do the trick too. But he would have to wait for the right time….

The Manager was thin, his face angular, and he matched up with the harsh steel angles of the desk and the big room somewhere in the

Security Building. His face had a kind of emotion—cold, detached, cynically superior.

"We don't get many of your kind," he said. "Political prisoners are becoming more scarce all the time. As your number indicates. From now on, you'll be No. 5274."

He looked at some papers, then up at Marquis. "You evidently found out a great deal. However, none of it will do you or what remains of your Underground fools any good." The Manager studied Marquis with detached curiosity. "You learned things concerning the Managerials that have so far remained secret."

It was partly a question. Marquis' lean and darkly inscrutable face smiled slightly. "You're good at understatement. Yes—I found out what we've suspected for some time. That the Managerial class has found some way to stay young. Either a remarkable longevity, or immortality. Of all the social evils that's the worst of all. To deny the people knowledge of such a secret."

The Manager nodded. "Then you did find that out? The Underground knows? Well, it will do no good."

"It will, eventually. They'll go on and someday they'll learn the secret." Marquis thought of Marden. Marden was as old as the New System of statism and inhumanity that had started off disguised as social-democracy. Three-hundred and three years old to be exact.

The Manager said, "No. 5274—you will be sent to the work colony on the Moon. You won't be back. We've tried re-conditioning rebels, but it doesn't work. A rebel has certain basic deviant characteristics and we can't overcome them sufficiently to make happy, well-adjusted workers out of you. However on the Moon—you will conform. It's a kind of social experiment there in associative reflex culture, you might say. You'll conform all right."

He was taken to a small, naked, gray-steel room. He thought about taking the capsule from his tooth now, but decided he might be observed. They would rush in an antidote and make him live. And he might not get a chance to take his life in any other way. He would try of course, but his knowledge of his future situation was vague—except that in it he would conform. There would be extreme conditioned-reflex therapeutic techniques. And it would be pretty horrible. That was all he knew.

He didn't see the pellet fall. He heard the slight sound it made and then saw the almost colorless gas hissing softly, clouding the room. He tasted nothing, smelled or felt nothing.

He passed out quickly and painlessly.

He was marched into another office, and he knew he was on the Moon. The far wall was spherical and was made up of the outer shell

of the pressure dome which kept out the frigid cold nights and furnace-hot days. It was opaque and Marquis could see the harsh black and white shadows out there—the metallic edges of the far crater wall.

This Manager was somewhat fat, with a round pink face and cold blue eyes. He sat behind a chrome shelf of odd shape suspended from the ceiling with silver wires.

The Manager said, "No. 5274, here there is only work. At first, of course, you will rebel. Later you will work, and finally there will be nothing else. Things here are rigidly scheduled, and you will learn the routines as the conditioning bells acquaint you with them. We are completely self-sufficient here. We are developing the perfect scientifically-controlled society. It is a kind of experiment. A closed system to test to what extremes we can carry our mastery of associative reflex to bring man security and happiness and freedom from responsibility."

Marquis didn't say anything. There was nothing to say. He knew he couldn't get away with trying to kill this particular Managerial specimen. But one man, alone, a rebel, with something left in him that still burned, could beat the system. *He had to!*

"Our work here is specialized. During the indoctrination period you will do a very simple routine job in coordination with the cybernetics machines. There, the machines and the nervous system of the workers become slowly cooperative. Machine and man learn to work very intimately together. Later, after the indoctrination—because of your specialized knowledge of food-concentrate preparation—we will transfer you to the food-mart. The period of indoctrination varies in length with the individuals. You will be screened now and taken to the indoctrination ward. We probably won't be seeing one another again. The bells take care of everything here. The bells and the machines. There is never an error—never any mistakes. Machines do not make mistakes."

He was marched out of there and through a series of rooms. He was taken in by generators, huge oscilloscopes. Spun like a living tube through curtains of vacuum tube voltimeters, electronic power panels. Twisted and squeezed through rolls of skeins of hook-up wire. Bent through shieldings of every color, size and shape. Rolled over panel plates, huge racks of glowing tubes, elaborate transceivers. Tumbled down long surfaces of gleaming bakelite. Plunged through color-indexed files of resistors and capacitances….

…here machine and man learn to work very intimately together.

As he drifted through the machine tooled nightmare, Marquis knew *what* he had been fighting all his life, what he would continue to fight with every grain of ingenuity. Mechanization—the horror of

losing one's identity and becoming part of an assembly line.

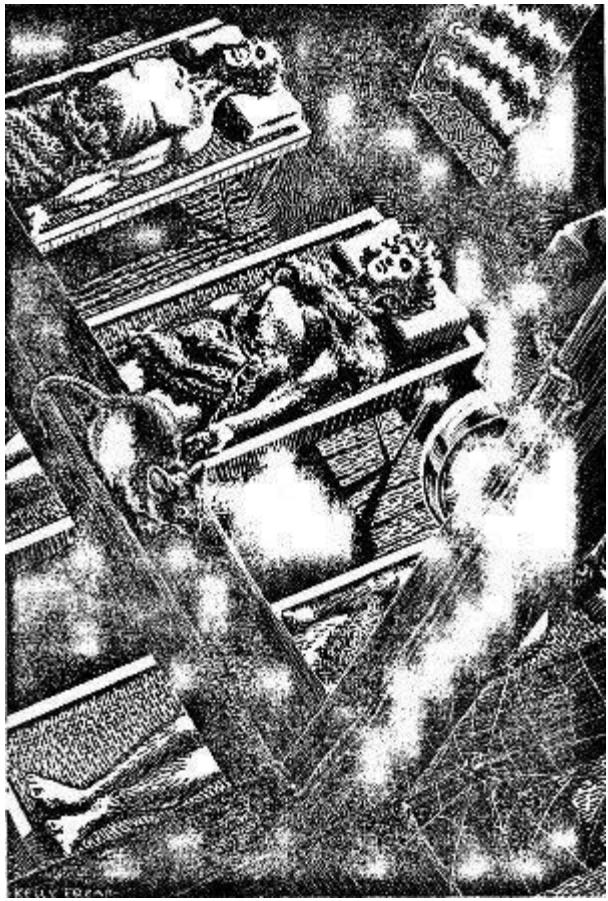
He could hear a clicking sound as tubes sharpened and faded in intensity. The clicking—rhythm, a hypnotic rhythm like the beating of his own heart—the throbbing and thrumming, the contracting and expanding, the pulsing and pounding….

…the machines and the nervous system of the workers become slowly cooperative.

Beds were spaced ten feet apart down both sides of a long gray metal hall. There were no cells, no privacy, nothing but beds and the gray metalene suits with numbers printed across the chest.

His bed, with his number printed above it, was indicated to him, and the guard disappeared. He was alone. It was absolutely silent. On his right a woman lay on a bed. No. 329. She had been here a long time. She appeared dead. Her breasts rose and fell with a peculiarly steady rhythm, and seemed to be coordinated with the silent, invisible throbbing of the metal walls. She might have been attractive once. Here it didn't make any difference. Her face was gray, like metal. Her hair was cropped short. Her uniform was the same as the man's on Marquis' left.

The man was No. 4901. He hadn't been here so long. His face was thin and gray. His hair was dark, and he was about the same size and build as Marquis. His mouth hung slightly open and his eyes were closed and there was a slight quivering at the ends of the fingers which were laced across his stomach.



When the bells rang they would arise....

"Hello," Marquis said. The man shivered, then opened dull eyes and looked up at Marquis. "I just got in. Name's Charles Marquis."

The man blinked. "I'm—I'm—No. 4901." He looked down at his chest, repeated the number. His fingers shook a little as he touched his lips.

Marquis said. "What's this indoctrination?"

"You—learn. The bells ring—you forget—and learn—"

"There's absolutely no chance of escaping?" Marquis whispered, more to himself than to 4901.

"Only by dying," 4901 shivered. His eyes rolled crazily, then he turned over and buried his face in his arms.

The situation had twisted all the old accepted values squarely around. Preferring death over life. But not because of any anti-life attitude, or pessimism, or defeatism. None of those negative attitudes that would have made the will-to-die abnormal under conditions in

which there would have been hope and some faint chance of a bearable future. Here to keep on living was a final form of de-humanized indignity, of humiliation, of ignominy, of the worst thing of all—loss of one's-self—of one's individuality. To die as a human being was much more preferable over continuing to live as something else—something neither human or machine, but something of both, with none of the dignity of either.

The screening process hadn't detected the capsule of poison in Marquis' tooth. The capsule contained ten grains of poison, only one of which was enough to bring a painless death within sixteen hours or so. That was his ace in the hole, and he waited only for the best time to use it.

Bells rang. The prisoners jumped from their beds and went through a few minutes of calisthenics. Other bells rang and a tray of small tins of food-concentrates appeared out of a slit in the wall by each bed. More bells rang, different kinds of bells, some deep and brazen, others high and shrill. And the prisoners marched off to specialized jobs co-operating with various machines.

You slept eight hours. Calisthenics five minutes. Eating ten minutes. Relaxation to the tune of musical bells, ten minutes. Work period eight hours. Repeat. That was all of life, and after a while Marquis knew, a man would not be aware of time, nor of his name, nor that he had once been human.

Marquis felt deep lancing pain as he tried to resist the bells. Each time the bells rang and a prisoner didn't respond properly, invisible rays of needle pain punched and kept punching until he reacted properly.

And finally he did as the bells told him to do. Finally he forgot that things had ever been any other way.

Marquis sat on his bed, eating, while the bells of eating rang across the bowed heads in the gray uniforms. He stared at the girl, then at the man, 4901. There were many opportunities to take one's own life here. That had perplexed him from the start—*why hasn't the girl, and this man, succeeded in dying?*

And all the others? They were comparatively new here, all these in this indoctrination ward. Why weren't they trying to leave in the only dignified way of escape left?

No. 4901 tried to talk, he tried hard to remember things. Sometimes memory would break through and bring him pictures of other times, of happenings on Earth, of a girl he had known, of times when he was a child. But only the mildest and softest kind of recollections….

Marquis said, "I don't think there's a prisoner here who doesn't

want to escape, and death is the only way out for us. We know that."

For an instant, No. 4901 stopped eating. A spoonful of food concentrate hung suspended between his mouth and the shelf. Then the food moved again to the urging of the bells. Invisible pain needles gouged Marquis' neck, and he ate again too, automatically, talking between tasteless bites. "A man's life at least is his own," Marquis said. "They can take everything else. But a man certainly has a right and a duty to take that life if by so doing he can retain his integrity as a human being. Suicide—"

No. 4901 bent forward. He groaned, mumbled "Don't—don't—" several times, then curled forward and lay on the floor knotted up into a twitching ball.

The eating period was over. The lights went off. Bells sounded for relaxation. Then the sleep bells began ringing, filling up the absolute darkness.

Marquis lay there in the dark and he was afraid. He had the poison. He had the will. But he couldn't be unique in that respect. What was the matter with the others? All right, the devil with them. Maybe they'd been broken too soon to act. He could act. Tomorrow, during the work period, he would take a grain of the poison. Put the capsule back in the tooth. The poison would work slowly, painlessly, paralyzing the nervous system, finally the heart. Sometime during the beginning of the next sleep period he would be dead. That would leave six or seven hours of darkness and isolation for him to remain dead, so they couldn't get to him in time to bring him back.

He mentioned suicide to the girl during the next work period. She moaned a little and curled up like a fetus on the floor. After an hour, she got up and began inserting punch cards into the big machine again. She avoided Marquis.

Marquis looked around, went into a corner with his back to the room, slipped the capsule out and let one of the tiny, almost invisible grains, melt on his tongue. He replaced the capsule and returned to the machine. A quiet but exciting triumph made the remainder of the work period more bearable.

Back on his bed, he drifted into sleep, into what he knew was the final sleep. He was more fortunate than the others. Within an hour he would be dead.

Somewhere, someone was screaming.

The sounds rose higher and higher. A human body, somewhere… pain unimaginable twisting up through clouds of belching steam… muscles quivering, nerves twitching… and somewhere a body floating and bobbing and crying… sheets of agony sweeping and returning in waves and the horror of unescapable pain expanding like a volcano of

madness….

Somewhere was someone alive who should be dead.

And then in the dark, in absolute silence, Marquis moved a little. He realized, vaguely, that the screaming voice was his own.

He stared into the steamy darkness and slowly, carefully, wet his lips. He moved. He felt his lips moving and the whisper sounding loud in the dark.

I'm alive!

He managed to struggle up out of the bed. He could scarcely remain erect. Every muscle in his body seemed to quiver. He longed to slip down into the darkness and escape into endless sleep. But he'd tried that. And he was still alive. He didn't know how much time had passed. He was sure of the poison's effects, but he wasn't dead. They had gotten to him in time.

Sweat exploded from his body. He tried to remember more. Pain. He lay down again. He writhed and perspired on the bed as his tortured mind built grotesque fantasies out of fragments of broken memory.

The routine of the unceasing bells went on. Bells, leap up. Bells, calisthenics. Bells, eat. Bells, march. Bells, work. He tried to shut out the bells. He tried to talk to 4901. 4901 covered up his ears and wouldn't listen. The girl wouldn't listen to him.

There were other ways. And he kept the poison hidden in the capsule in his hollow tooth. He had been counting the steps covering the length of the hall, then the twenty steps to the left, then to the right to where the narrow corridor led again to the left where he had seen the air-lock.

After the bells stopped ringing and the darkness was all around him, he got up. He counted off the steps. No guards, no alarms, nothing to stop him. They depended on the conditioners to take care of everything. This time he would do it. This time they wouldn't bring him back.

No one else could even talk with him about it, even though he knew they all wanted to escape. Some part of them still wanted to, but they couldn't. So it was up to him. He stopped against the smooth, opaque, up-curving glasite dome. It had a brittle bright shine that reflected from the Moon's surface. It was night out there, with an odd metallic reflection of Earthlight against the naked crags.

He hesitated. He could feel the intense and terrible cold, the airlessness out there fingering hungrily, reaching and whispering and waiting.

He turned the wheel. The door opened. He entered the air-lock and shut the first door when the air-pressure was right. He turned the other wheel and the outer lock door swung outward. The out-rushing

air spun him outward like a balloon into the awful airless cold and naked silence.

His body sank down into the thick pumice dust that drifted up around him in a fine powdery blanket of concealment. He felt no pain. The cold airlessness dissolved around him in deepening darkening pleasantness. This time he was dead, thoroughly and finally and gloriously dead, even buried, and they couldn't find him. And even if they did finally find him, what good would it do them?

Some transcendental part of him seemed to remain to observe and triumph over his victory. This time he was dead to stay.

This time he knew at once that the twisting body in the steaming pain, the distorted face, the screams rising and rising were all Charles Marquis.

Maybe a dream though, he thought. So much pain, so much screaming pain, is not real. In some fraction of a fraction of that interim between life and death, one could dream of so much because dreams are timeless.

Yet he found himself anticipating, even through the shredded, dissociated, nameless kind of pain, a repetition of that other time.

The awful bitterness of defeat.

He opened his eyes slowly. It was dark, the same darkness. He was on the same bed. And the old familiar dark around and the familiar soundlessness that was now heavier than the most thunderous sound.

Everything around him then seemed to whirl up and go down in a crash. He rolled over to the floor and lay there, his hot face cooled by the cold metal.

As before, some undeterminable interim of time had passed. And he knew he was alive. His body was stiff. He ached. There was a drumming in his head, and then a ringing in his ears as he tried to get up, managed to drag himself to an unsteady stance against the wall. He felt now an icy surety of horror that carried him out to a pin-point in space.

A terrible fatigue hit him. He fell back onto the bed. He lay there trying to figure out how he could be alive.

He finally slept pushed into it by sheer and utter exhaustion. The bells called him awake. The bells started him off again. He tried to talk again to 4901. They avoided him, all of them. But they weren't really alive any more. How long could he maintain some part of himself that he knew definitely was Charles Marquis?

He began a ritual, a routine divorced from that to which all those being indoctrinated were subjected. It was a little private routine of

his own. Dying, and then finding that he was not dead.

He tried it many ways. He took more grains of the poison. But he was always alive again.

"You—4901! Damn you—talk to me! You know what's been happening to me?"

The man nodded quickly over his little canisters of food-concentrate.

"This indoctrination—you, the girl—you went crazy when I talked about dying—what—?"

The man yelled hoarsely. "Don't… don't say it! All this—what you've been going through, can't you understand? All that is part of indoctrination. You're no different than the rest of us! We've all had it! All of us. All of us! Some more maybe than others. It had to end. You'll have to give in. Oh God, I wish you didn't. I wish you could win. But you're no smarter than the rest of us. *You'll have to give in!*"

It was 4901's longest and most coherent speech. Maybe I can get somewhere with him, Marquis thought. I can find out something.

But 4901 wouldn't say any more. Marquis kept on trying. No one, he knew, would ever realize what that meant—to keep on trying to die when no one would let you, when you kept dying, and then kept waking up again, and you weren't dead. No one could ever understand the pain that went between the dying and the living. And even Marquis couldn't remember it afterward. He only knew how painful it had been. And knowing that made each attempt a little harder for Marquis.

He tried the poison again. There was the big stamping machine that had crushed him beyond any semblance of a human being, but he had awakened, alive again, whole again. There was the time he grabbed the power cable and felt himself, in one blinding flash, conquer life in a burst of flame. He slashed his wrists at the beginning of a number of sleep periods.

When he awakened, he was whole again. There wasn't even a scar.

He suffered the pain of resisting the eating bells until he was so weak he couldn't respond, and he knew that he died that time too—from pure starvation.

But I can't stay dead!

"*…You'll have to give in!*"

He didn't know when it was. He had no idea now how long he had been here. But a guard appeared, a cold-faced man who guided Marquis back to the office where the fat, pink-faced little Manager waited for him behind the shelf suspended by silver wires from the ceiling.

The Manager said. “You are the most remarkable prisoner we’ve ever had here. There probably will not be another like you here again.”

Marquis’ features hung slack, his mouth slightly open, his lower lip drooping. He knew how he looked. He knew how near he was to cracking completely, becoming a senseless puppet of the bells. “Why is that?” he whispered.

“You’ve tried repeatedly to—you know what I mean of course. You have kept on attempting this impossible thing, attempted it more times than anyone else here ever has! Frankly, we didn’t think any human psyche had the stuff to try it that many times—to resist that long.”

The Manager made a curious lengthened survey of Marquis’ face. “Soon you’ll be thoroughly indoctrinated. You are, for all practical purposes, now. You’ll work automatically then, to the bells, and think very little about it at all, except in a few stereotyped ways to keep your brain and nervous system active enough to carry out simple specialized work duties. Or while the New System lasts. And I imagine that will be forever.”

“Forever….”

“Yes, yes. You’re immortal now,” the Manager smiled. “Surely, after all this harrowing indoctrination experience, you realize *that*!”

Immortal. I might have guessed. I might laugh now, but I can’t. We who pretend to live in a hell that is worse than death, and you, the Managerials who live in paradise. We two are immortal.

“That is, you’re immortal as long as we desire you to be. You’ll never grow any older than we want you to, never so senile as to threaten efficiency. That was what you were so interested in finding out on Earth, wasn’t it? The mystery behind the Managerials? Why they never seemed to grow old. Why we have all the advantage, no senility, no weakening, the advantage of accumulative experience without the necessity of re-learning?”

“Yes,” Marquis whispered.

The Manager leaned back. He lit a paraette and let the soothing nerve-tonic seep into his lungs. He explained.

“Every one of you political prisoners we bring here want, above everything else, to die. It was a challenge to our experimental social order here. We have no objection to your killing yourself. We have learned that even the will to die can be conditioned out of the most determined rebel. As it has been conditioned out of you. You try to die enough times, and you do die, but the pain of resurrection is so great that finally it is impossible not only to kill yourself, but even to think of attempting it.”

Marquis couldn’t say anything. The memory called up by the

mention of self-destruction rasped along his spine like chalk on a blackboard. He could feel the total-recall of sensation, the threatening bursts of pain. “No….” he whispered over and over. “No—please—no—”

The Manager said. “We won’t mention it anymore. You’ll never be able to try any overt act of self-destruction again.”

The bright light from the ceiling lanced like splinters into the tender flesh of Marquis’ eyeballs, danced about the base of his brain in reddened choleric circles. His face had drawn back so that his cheekbones stood out and his nose was beak-like. His irises became a bright painful blue in the reddened ovals of his eyes.

The Manager yawned as he finished explaining. “Each prisoner entering here has an identification punch-plate made of his unique electro-magnetic vibratory field. That’s the secret of our immortality and yours. Like all matter, human difference is in the electro-magnetic, vibratory rates. We have these punch-plates on file for every prisoner. We have one of you. Any dead human body we merely put in a tank which dissolves it into separate cells, a mass of stasis with potentiality to be reformed into any type of human being of which we have an identification punch-plate, you see? This tank of dissociated cells is surrounded by an electro-magnetic field induced from a machine by one of the identification punch-plates. That particular human being lives again, the body, its mind, its life pattern identical to that from which the original punch-plate was made. Each time you have died, we reduced your body, regardless of its condition, to dissociated cells in the tank. The identification punch-plate was put in the machine. Your unique electro-magnetic field reformed the cells into you. It could only be you, as you are now. From those cells we can resurrect any one of whom we have an identification plate.

“That is all, No. 5274. Now that you’re indoctrinated, you will work from now on in the food-mart, because of your experience.”

For an undeterminable length of time, he followed the routines of the bells. In the big food-mart, among the hydroponic beds, and the canning machines; among the food-grinders and little belts that dropped cans of food-concentrate into racks and sent them off into the walls.

He managed to talk more and more coherently with No. 4901. He stopped referring to suicide, but if anyone had the idea that Marquis had given up the idea of dying, they were wrong. Marquis was stubborn. Somewhere in him the flame still burned. He wouldn’t let it go out. The bells couldn’t put it out. The throbbing machines couldn’t put it out. And now he had at last figured out a way to beat the game.

During an eating period, Marquis said to 4901. “You want to die.

Wait a minute—I'm talking about something we can both talk and think about. A murder agreement. You understand? We haven't been conditioned against killing each other. It's only an overt act of selfdes—all right, we don't think about that. But we can plan a way to kill each other."

4901 looked up. He stopped eating momentarily. He was interested. "What's the use though?" Pain shadowed his face. "We only go through it—come back again—"

"I have a plan. The way I have it worked out, they'll never bring either one of us back."

That wasn't exactly true. *One* of them would have to come back. Marquis hoped that 4901 wouldn't catch on to the fact that he would have to be resurrected, but that Marquis never would. He hoped that 4901's mind was too foggy and dull to see through the complex plan. And that was the way it worked.

Marquis explained. 4901 listened and smiled. It was the first time Marquis had ever seen a prisoner smile.

He left what remained of the capsule of poison where 4901 could get it. During one of the next four eating periods, 4901 was to slip the poison into Marquis' food can. Marquis wouldn't know what meal, or what can. He had to eat. The bells had conditioned him that much. And not to eat would be an overt act of self-destruction.

He wasn't conditioned not to accept death administered by another.

And then, after an eating period, 4901 whispered to him. "You're poisoned. It was in one of the cans you just ate."

"Great!" almost shouted Marquis. "All right. Now I'll die by the end of the next work period. That gives us this sleep period and all the next work period. During that time I'll dispose of you as I've said."

4901 went to his bed and the bells rang and the dark came and both of them slept.

Number 4901 resisted the conditioners enough to follow Marquis past his regular work room into the food-mart. As planned, 4901 marched on and stood in the steaming shadows behind the hydroponic beds.

Marquis worked for a while at the canning machines, at the big grinding vats. Then he went over to 4901 and said. "Turn around now."

4901 smiled. He turned around. "Good luck," he said. "Good luck—to you!"

Marquis hit 4901 across the back of the neck with an alloy bar and killed him instantly. He changed clothes with the dead man. He put his own clothes in a refuse incinerator. Quickly, he dragged the body over and tossed it into one of the food-grinding vats. His head

bobbed up above the gray swirling liquid once, then the body disappeared entirely, was ground finely and mixed with the other foodstuff.

Within eight hours the cells of 4901 would be distributed minutely throughout the contents of thousands of cans of food-concentrate. Within that time much of it would have been consumed by the inmates and Managers.

At the end of that work period, Marquis returned to his cell. He went past his own bed and stopped in front of 4901's bed.

The sleep bells sounded and the dark came again. This would be the final dark, Marquis knew. This time he had beat the game. The delayed-action poison would kill him. He had on 4901's clothes with his identification number. He was on 4901's bed.

He would die—as 4901. The guards would finally check on the missing man in the food-mart. But they would never find him. They would find 4901 dead, a suicide. And they would put the body labeled 4901 in the tank, dissolve it into dissociated cells and they would subject those cells to the electro-magnetic field of 4901.

And they would resurrect—4901.

Not only have I managed to die, Marquis thought, but I've managed the ultimate suicide. There won't even be a body, no sign anywhere that I have ever been at all. Even my cells will have been resurrected as someone else. As a number 4901.

"And that's the way it was," No. 4901 would tell new prisoners coming in. Sometimes they listened to him and seemed interested, but the interest always died during indoctrination. But No. 4901's interest in the story never died.

He knew that now he could never let himself die as a human being either, that he could never let himself become completely controlled by the bells. He'd been nearly dead as an individual, but No. 5274 had saved him from that dead-alive anonymity. He could keep alive, and maintain hope now by remembering what 5274 had done. He clung to that memory. As long as he retained that memory of hope—of triumph—at least some part of him would keep burning, as something had kept on burning within the heart of 5274.

So every night before the sleep bells sounded, he would go over the whole thing in minute detail, remembering 5274's every word and gesture, the details of his appearance. He told the plan over to himself every night, and told everyone about it who came in to the indoctrination ward.

Swimming up through the pain of resurrection, he had been a little mad at 5274 at first, and then he had realized that at least the plan had enabled one man to beat the game.

“He will always be alive to me. Maybe, in a way, he’s part of me. Nobody knows. But his memory will live. He succeeded in a kind of ultimate dying—no trace of him anywhere. But the memory of him and what he did will be alive when the New System and the Managers are dead. That spirit will assure the Underground of victory—someday. And meanwhile, I’ll keep 5274 alive.

“He even knew the psychology of these Managers and their System. That they can’t afford to make an error. He knew they’d still have that identification punch-plate of him. That they would have one more plate than they had prisoners. But he anticipated what they would do there too. To admit there was one more identification plate than there were prisoners would be to admit a gross error. Of course they could dissolve one of the other prisoners and use 5274’s plate and resurrect 5274. But they’d gain nothing. There would still be an extra plate. You see?

“So they destroyed the plate. He knew they would. And they also had to go back through the records, to Earth, through the security files there, through the birth records, everything. And they destroyed every trace, every shred of evidence that No. 5274 ever existed.”

So he kept the memory alive and that kept 4901 alive while the other prisoners become automatons, hearing, feeling, sensing nothing except the bells. Remembering nothing, anticipating nothing.

But 4901 could remember something magnificent, and so he could anticipate, and that was hope, and faith. He found that no one really believed him but he kept on telling it anyway, the story of the Plan.

“Maybe this number didn’t exist,” someone would say. “If there’s no record anywhere—”

4901 would smile. “In my head, there’s where the record is. *I* know. *I* remember.”

And so it was that 4901 was the only one who still remembered and who could still smile when sometime after that—no one in the prison colony knew how long—the Underground was victorious, and the Managerial System crumbled.

THE HUDDLERS
By William Campbell Gault
Illustrated by Ernie Barth

He was a reporter from Venus with an assignment on Earth. He got his story but, against orders, he fell in love—and therein lies this story.

That's what *we* always called them, where I come from, huddlers. Damnedest thing to see from any distance, the way they huddle. They had one place, encrusting the shore line for miles on one of the land bodies they called the Eastern Seaboard. A coagulation in this crust contained eight million of the creatures, *eight million*.

They called it New York, and it was bigger than most of the others, but typical. It wasn't bad enough living side by side; the things built mounds and lived one above the other. Apartments they called them. What monstrosities they were.

We couldn't figure this huddling, at first.

All our attention since Akers' first penetration into space had been directed another way in the galaxy, and though I'll grant you unified and universal concentration may be considered unwise in some areas, it's been our greatest strength. It's brought us rather rapidly to the front, I'm sure you'll agree, and we're not the oldest planet, by a damned sight.

Well, by the time we got to the huddlers, Akers was dead and Murten was just an old man with vacant eyes. Jars was handling the Department, though you might say Deering ran it, being closer to most of the gang. Jars was always so cold; nobody ever got to know him really well.

They divided on the huddling. Fear, Jars said, and love, Deering said, but who could say for sure?

As Deering said to me, "What could they fear? They've got everything they need, everything but knowledge and their better specimens are getting closer to that, every day."

In the laboratory, Deering said this, and how did we know old Jars was in a corner, breaking down a spirigel?

"They fear each other," Jars said, as though it was an official announcement, as though any fact is permanent. "And they fear nature. It's the most fear ridden colony of bipeds a sane mind could imagine."

Deering looked at me, and winked.

Jars went back to the spirigel.

Deering said, “Love, love, love. All they sing about, all they write about, all they talk about, love, love, love.”

Jars was just tracing a *z* line on the spirigel and he put down his legort at that. “Rather superficial thinking, from a scientist,” he said quietly. “Surface manifestations to be considered as indicative. Oral and verbal camouflage to be accepted as valid. Deering, old thing, please—”

Deering shrugged. “So I am—what do they call it, a Pollyanna. Isn’t that a pretty word? So, I’m a Pollyanna.”

“I rather think that describes you partially,” Jars said, “and with this particular planet we’re discussing, it can be a dangerous attitude.”

“So?” Deering said, nudging me. “And could I ask why?”

“Ask it.”

“I ask.”

“You’ve recorded the state of their development. They have, among other things, achieved nuclear fission.”

“So? In the fourth grade we are teaching nuclear fission.”

“We are a scientific people. They haven’t been, until very, very recently. You have noted, I hope, their first extensive use of this new discovery?”

“Hero—Helo—” Deering shrugged. “My memory.”

“Hiroshima,” Jars supplied. “Love—, my friend?”

“I have noted it,” Deering said. “We spoke, a while ago, of surface manifestations.”

“We shall continue to. You have witnessed the mechanical excellence of their machines, in some ways beyond ours, because of their greater element wealth. You have noted the increased concentration of their better minds, their scientific minds. How long do you think it will be, friend, before they are ready for us?”

“Ready, ready—? In what way, ready?”

“The only way they know, the only thing they seem to have time for—ready for war.”

“War—,” Deering said, and sighed. “Oh, Jars, they will be beyond war, certainly, before they are cognizant of us. They are no tribe of incompetents; they grow each day.”

“They—?” Jars’ smile was cynical. “Their scientists grow. Are their scientists in command, sir?”

That “sir” had been unnecessary; Jars was the senior mind, here. Deering didn’t miss it, and he flushed.

Jars said softly, “I apologize. It was not a thing to say. I have spent too much time in the study of these—monsters.”

They had gone to school, together, those two, and the bond was there and the respect, but they were different, mentally, and each knew it.

"You have a sharp tongue," Deering said, "but a sharper mind. I believe I can stand it." He smiled. "Love, fear, hate—what does it matter to us, except as phenomena?"

"It matters to us, believe me, please. It concerns us very much, Arn."

When Jars got to first names, he was emotionally wrought. I looked at him in surprise. And so did Deering. We weren't ever going to warm up to him, but he was our best mind and there wasn't a man in the department who didn't appreciate that.

We stared at him, and he sat down on the high bench near the Maling converters. He looked old and he was tired, we could see. "Evil," he said quietly. "Fear, hate, evil—which of the three is the father and which are the sons? I suppose fear is the father."

"I'd always thought so," Deering said, "though my education was almost completely confined to the technical. I'm rather skimpy on the humanities."

"And I," Jars said, and now looked at me. "But not you, Werig."

"I don't know them, sir," I said. "Surface manifestations, as we've said before today. It would need a closer study. Their huddling is what intrigues me the most."

One of the rare smiles came to Jars' lined face as he looked at Deering. "Huddling, the lad says. If you don't say it, I won't, Arn."

Deering smiled in return. "We'll change the routine, this time; you say 'love' and I'll say 'fear'. But seriously, Jars, you fear these—people?"

"I fear them," Jars said. "Scientifically, perhaps, they are tyros, but mechanically they are not. They have discovered forces and developed machines which they do not understand, and yet, have achieved efficiency with them. I fear any monster that powerful even though it is blind."

"And you think there is a possibility of their becoming—aware of us within any determinable time?"

"I do. You will remember how quickly the Algreans developed, once they achieved unity? You will remember how quickly they became a threat?"

"Yes," Deering said quietly, "and I have been trying a long time to forget what we did to that planetoid."

"It was necessary for survival," Jars said simply. "I think, by any standards, we would be the ones chosen to survive."

Deering's smile was cynical. "At least, by *our* standards. We had a closer communication with them. About the huddlers, we know only what we convert from their stronger video broadcasts. It is a device they seem to use more for entertainment than for information."

Jars nodded, and stood up. "And love is their major

entertainment, perhaps. Love and war. But we gabble. I had a plan in mind, a plan to put before the assembly."

He had a plan, all right, and I was part of it. The humanities had been no major with me, but they didn't want a scholar, they wanted a reporter, anyway. Or perhaps I could be called a recorder.

Jars talked and the assembly listened. They always do, when Jars talks.

And I was their boy, and went into a concentrated and complete briefing. They put me under the lucidate and poured it to me, night and day, all the information we had on the huddlers and all the theories based on that information.

They put me into a space sphere, and said "good luck" and do our people proud, young man. Oh, yes. And don't fall in love. Oh, no. They'd pick me up, again, when they got a signal. They didn't expect to wait too long for that, I guess, at the time.

The sphere was a relic of the Algrean business, and Algrea hadn't been this much of a trip. But Mechanics said it would do, and it did.

I landed in the Pacific, about three-quarters of a mile off the Santa Monica yacht basin, and let the sphere float north for a while until I reached a secluded spot. In a small curve of the shore line, a few miles above Santa Monica, I beached her, and opened the dissolving cocks.

I watched her melt into the surging water, and turned to face the red and green light almost immediately overhead. I walked up from the beach to the road, not even knowing what they looked like. Their evolution should have matched ours, but who could be sure?

For all I knew, I might be a freak to them. I should have thought of that before dissolving the ship.

Above, the light changed from red to green and across the street, I saw a sign. This was Sunset Boulevard, and the Pacific Coast Highway. This was open country, but Los Angeles.

Along the Coast Highway, a pair of lights were bearing down on me, and they seemed to waver, as though the machine were under imperfect control.

I moved back, out of the way, and the light overhead turned to red. The car stopped about even with me, its motor running.

I couldn't see the occupants nor the driver. The light changed, the car jerked, and the motor stopped.

"Damn," somebody said. It was a female voice.

There was a grinding noise, and another damn, and then a head appeared through the open window on my side of the road.

It was a blond head, and what I could see of the face looked attractive.

"Are you sober?" she asked.

"Not always," I answered. "Some times I'm quite cheerful. But I'm some distance from home, and have nothing to be cheerful about, at the moment."

"Try not to be a Cerf," she said angrily. "What I mean is, are you —have you been drinking?"

"Not recently, though I could use some water." I could see her face more clearly now, and it was like the faces of our women, only prettier than most, I thought.

I could see her face more clearly now, and it was like the faces of our women, only prettier than most, I thought.

"Look," she said, "I'm drunk. Could you drive this thing? Could you drive me home?"

"I'd be glad to," I answered, "if you will tell me where you live."

She gave me an address on Sunset, and this was Sunset, this lateral street, ending at the ocean. So, quite obviously, it was an address I could find.

I went over to climb in behind the wheel. There were two smells in that pretty car with the canvas top. One smell was of gasoline, the other was of alcohol.

"There's obviously alcohol in the gasoline," I said, "though that shouldn't prevent it from igniting."

"A funny, funny man," she said. "Keep the dialogue to a minimum, will you, Bogart? I'm not exactly sharp, right now."

I depressed the starter button, and the motor caught. I swung left onto Sunset, and started up the hill.

The car was clearly a recent model, but Jars had been wrong about the mechanical excellence of these huddlers. The machine simply had no life, no zest.

We drove past a shrine and around two curves, climbing all the while, past some huddled houses on the left, and the whole shining sea spread out on the right.

The woman said, "If you know a place where the coffee is drinkable, stop."

"I have no money," I said. Diamonds I had, a bagful of them, for we knew that huddlers treasured diamonds. But no money.

"I've got money," she said. "I've got a hell of a lot more money than I have sense. Have you ever been in love, Bogart?"

"Never," I said.

We were coming into a small huddled area, now. A sign read, *Pacific Palisades*.

"I have," she said. "I still am. Isn't it a miserable rotten world?"

"This one?" I asked, and then said quickly, "I mean—this part of it?"

"Any part of it," she said. "I've seen most of it, and any part where there's men is bad, Bogart."

"My name," I told her, "is not Bogart. My name is Fred Werig."

"A pleasure, Fred," she said. "My name is Jean Decker. And I'm beginning to feel better."

"It couldn't be my company," I said, "so it must be the air. I haven't seen any coffee places that are open."

I caught a flare of light from the corner of my eye, and turned to see her applying flame to something in her mouth. I remembered from our history; she was smoking. It was a habit long dead where I came from.

And then I remembered what she'd said about being drunk, and knew that, too, as one of our long disused vices. What was it Akers had said about 'being directed'? A theory, but discredited now, since our scientific advance. But this almost parallels evolution?

"Cigarette?" she said, and I said, "No, thanks. I—don't smoke."

“You’re the only thing in Los Angeles that doesn’t,” she said bitterly. “Where are you from, Fred?”

“New York,” I said. “Where are you from, Jean?”

“Believe it or not, I was born here,” she said. “I’m one of the three people in this town who was born here.”

“It’s a big town, isn’t it?” I said. “Less huddled than the others.”

“Huddled,” she said, and laughed. “Huddled. I like that. They huddle, all right, and not just the football teams. The gregarious instinct, Freddy boy.”

“Well, yes,” I agreed, “but why, Jean? Why haven’t they outgrown it? Is it—fear?”

“You would have to ask somebody bright,” she said. “When you get to Bundy, turn over toward Wilshire. We’ll find an eating place that’s open.”

“You tell me when I get to Bundy,” I said. “I’m not exactly familiar with this part of town.”

She told me, and we got to Wilshire, eventually, and on Wilshire there were many eating places.

We went into one; it was too cold to eat outside. And it was bright in there, and I got my first really clear look at the face and figure of Jean Decker.

Well, it was ridiculous, the attraction that seemed to emanate from her. It actually made me weak.

And she was staring at me, too.

“If you’re hungry,” she said finally, “get a sandwich. You won’t find me stingy…. What in the world is that material in that suit, Fred?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “You are beautiful, Jean.”

She smiled. “Well, thanks. You can have a piece of pie, too, for that. That certainly is a fine weave in that material. What did your tailor call it?”

We were next to a sort of alcove, furnished with a table and two high-backed benches, and she sat down. I sat across from her.

"I don't have a tailor," I said. "Your lips are so red, Jean."

She frowned. "Slowly, sailor."

Then a waitress was there, and I saw how red her lips were, too, and I realized it was another of the old vices I'd forgotten, cosmetics.

"Just coffee, for me, black," Jean said. "Golden boy over there will have a beef barbecue, probably, won't you, Fred?"

"I guess," I said. "And some milk, cow's milk."

Jean laughed. "It's my money. Have canary milk."

"Not tonight," I said.

The waitress went away, and there was a noticeable period of silence. Jean was tracing some design on the table top with her index finger. Her nails, too, were painted, I saw. I liked the effect of that.

She looked up, and faced me gravely, "Fred, you're a very attractive gent, which you undoubtedly know. Are you connected with pictures?"

I shook my head. "Just a traveler, a tourist."

She said, "Oh" and went back to tracing the design. I thought her finger trembled.

A very dim smile on her face, and she didn't look away from the table top. "You've been—picked up before, undoubtedly."

"No. What kind of talk is this, Jean?"

Now, she looked up. "Crazy talk. You're no New Yorker, Freddy lad. You're a Middle Westerner; you can't fool me. Fresh from the farm and craving cow's milk."

"I never saw a cow in my life," I told her truthfully, "though I've

heard about them. What makes you think I'm from a farm?"

"Your freshness, your complexion and—everything about you."

The waitress brought our food, then, and I didn't answer. I tried to keep my eyes away from Jean as I ate; I had a mission, here, and no time for attachments beyond the casual. I was sure, even then, that loving Jean Decker would never qualify as casual.

She drank her coffee and smoked; I ate.

She asked, "Where are you staying, in town, Fred? I'm sober enough to drive, now."

"I'll get public transportation," I said. "You get home, and to bed."

She laughed. "Public transportation? Freddy, you don't know this town. There isn't any. Did you just get here, tonight?"

I looked at her, and nodded.

"On the bum?" she said quietly.

"I—suppose," I said honestly, "though the word has connotations which don't describe me." I put my hand in my jacket pocket and fumbled in the open bag for one of the smaller diamonds. I brought one out about the size of my little finger nail, and placed it on the table.

All the light in the room seemed to be suddenly imprisoned there. She stared at it, and up at me.

"Fred—for heaven's sake—that's not—real, is it?"

I nodded.

"But—it—" She glanced from the diamond to me, her mouth partially open. "Fred, what kind of monstrous gag is this? God, I thought I'd seen everything, growing up in this town. Fred—"

"I'd like to sell it," I said. "You, Jean, are my only friend in this town. Could you help me arrange for its sale?"

She was looking at me with wonder now, studying me. "Hot?" she asked.

"Hot—?"

"Stolen—you know what I mean."

"Stolen? Jean, you didn't mean to accuse me of that."

Skepticism was ugly on her lovely face. "Fred, what's your angle? You step out of the darkness like some man from Mars in a strange suit, with no money, but a diamond that must be worth—"

"We'll learn what it's worth," I said. "Mars isn't inhabited, Jean. Don't you trust me? Have I done anything to cause you to distrust me?"

"Nothing," she said.

"Do you distrust all men, Jean?"

"No. Just the ones I've met. Oh, baby, and I thought you were a farmer." She was crushing out her cigarette. "You haven't a place to

stay, but I've got a guest house, and you'll stay there, tonight. You aren't stepping back into the darkness, tonight, Fred Werig. You, I want to know about."

The words held a threat, but not her meaning, I was sure. And what better way to orient myself than in the home of a friend?

That was some home she had. Massive, in an architecture I'd assumed was confined to the south-eastern United States. Two-story place, with huge, two-story pillars and a house-wide front porch, the great lawn studded with giant trees.

And she lived there alone, excepting for the servants. She was no huddler, and I told her that.

"Dad owned a lot of property in this town," she said. "He was a great believer in the future of this town."

At the time I didn't understand what that had to do with her lack of huddling.

The guest house was small, but very comfortable, a place of three bedrooms and two baths and a square living room with a natural stone fireplace.

I had my first night of sleep on this planet, and slept very well. I woke to a cloudy morning, and the sound of someone knocking on the front door.

It was a servant, and she said, "Miss Decker sent me to inform you that breakfast will be ready any time you want it, sir. We are eating inside, this morning, because of the cold."

"I'll be there, soon, thank you," I said, and she went away.

Showering, I was thinking of Akers for some reason and his directed theory and what was that other theory he'd had? Oh, yes, the twin planets. Senile, he was, by that time and not much listened to, but a mind like that? And who had he been associated with at that time? It was before my birth, but I'd read about it, long ago. The Visitor, Akers had called this man. The Earth man who had come to Venus. And what had his name been?

Beer—? Beers—? No, but like that—and it came.

Ambrose Bierce.

Jean wore a light green robe, for breakfast, and it was difficult for me to take my eyes away from her.

"I'm not usually this informal at mixed breakfasts," she told me, smiling, "but I thought it might warm up enough for a swim a little later."

She threw the robe aside, and I saw she was wearing a scanty garment beneath it. Evidently the huddlers didn't swim naked, and I wondered at a moral code that sanctioned drinking alcohol but was ashamed of the human body.

I was glad the house had been cold when I answered the maid's summons, for I had worn a robe I'd found there.

Fruit juice and wheat cakes and sausage and toast and jelly and eggs and milk. We ate in a small room, off a larger dining room, a small room whose walls were glass on two sides.

"It's too old a house to modernize completely," Jean told me. "I grew up in this house."

"You don't—work, Jean?"

"No. Should I?"

"Work or study. Life must be very dull if you don't do one of those."

"You might have a point there," she said. "I tried everything from the movies to sculpture. I wasn't very good at anything. What do you do, Fred?"

"I'm a perpetual guest," I said lightly. "Do you read much, Jean?"

"Too much, though nothing very heavy, I grant you."

"Have you ever read about a man named Ambrose Bierce?"

"I've read everything he ever wrote. Why did you ask that, Fred?"

"I—heard about him. I wondered who he was."

"Where did you hear about him, Fred? In Mexico?"

"No. I don't remember where I heard about him."

"He disappeared," she said quietly, "some time right before the first world war. I've forgotten the exact year. I think it was 1914."

Before the war, before the "first" war…. And I thought of Jars' wife, who had come to us just before this last planetary war—the "second" world war. And what was his pet name for her? Guest, he called her, and joked about her coming from another world. But didn't Jars defend the discredited late-in-life theories of Akers? I tried to remember the name of Jars' wife, and then it came.

I asked, "And Amelia Earhart?"

Jean's voice was rough. "July 2nd, 1937. I guess I'll never forget that, when my god died. What are you trying to say? Is it some new damned cult you're promoting, Fred?"

"You called her a god. Why, Jean?"

"I don't know. I was only thirteen when she died. But she was so clean, so—so free and windswept, so—oh, what the spirit of America should be—and isn't."

I looked up to see tears in her eyes. Why was she moved? This girl who certainly knew corruption, this worldly, lovely girl. I smiled at her.

She wiped the tears with the back of her hand. "Fred, you are the strangest—I know this town's a zoo, but you, Fred—"

I continued to smile at her. "I'm just a guy trying to learn. May I repeat something I said last night? You're beautiful, Jean."

"You're no three-headed calf, yourself," she said.

Twin planets and parallel evolution…. Parallel destiny? Not with a third planetary war shaping up here. Three major wars in less than fifty years. Why, why, why….

She said, "Thinking, again? You do a lot of thinking, don't you?"

"I have to think of something besides you," I told her honestly. "I can't afford to fall in love with you, Jean. I've too many places to go and too many things to see."

She just stared at me. It must have been a full minute before she said, "Well, I'll be damned."

After breakfast, it was still cold, and she said, "There'll be no swim this morning, I see. If you want to get an appraisal on that diamond, Fred, I'll phone one of our jewelers to come out."

"I'd appreciate that," I said. "Would it be all right if I took these newspapers back to my room, now?"

"Just dandy," she said. "Sorry to be boring you."

"You're not," I told her earnestly. "Believe me, you're not."

The papers were interesting. Nowhere was it stated, but a glance at the front pages showed they were on opposite sides of the political fence. On my planet, we keep the editorial opinion in the editorial columns. Not so with these. The wire services were impartial and the accounts in both papers identical. That was as far as the similarities went. Reading the other accounts was like living in two worlds.

An informed people will always be free. Well, perhaps these weren't typical.

I was to see papers a lot worse than these before long.

I was just starting the want ads when the knock came at the door. It was the maid, again; the jeweler was at the house.

A small man, suave and dark, with the manners of a diplomat, fawning like a puppy.

It was a perfect stone, he decided. He had, he was sure, a customer who would be interested. Would I accept eight thousand dollars for it?

I said I would, and he left.

We were in the living room, and Jean stood near the tall front windows. She had changed to a suit of some soft blue material.

"As soon as I get the money," I said, "we're going out for some fun, aren't we? I owe you for a beef barbecue."

"You don't owe me anything," she said. She didn't look at me.

"You'll get over him," I said.

"Him—?" She turned to look at me curiously.

"That man you're in love with, that man you told me about last night."

"Oh," she said. "Oh. I was drunk last night, Fred. I'm not in love."

Silence. That attraction of hers pulling at me like some localized gravity, silence, and the beating of my heart. Silence, my hands trembling, my knees aching.

"I'd like to see some fights," I said. "Would you like to?"

She frowned. "Not particularly." She stared at me, shook her head, and looked away.

"Well," I said, "I haven't finished the want ads."

"Of course," she said. "Get right back to them, Freddy. You never know when you'll find a bargain."

They weren't very interesting. I kept seeing her standing next to the window, looking unhappy, frustrated, somehow. I kept seeing the soft fabric of the suit clinging to her beautiful body and the proud grace of her posture.

I went back to the house, and she was sitting on the davenport near the fireplace. She looked up without expression.

I asked, "Is there a library around here?"

She sighed, and rose. She said, "Follow me."

She led me to a room whose four walls were lined with books. There was a wide glass door leading out from this to the patio.

"Dad's old retreat," she said. "Everything from Aristotle to Zola. If there's something you don't see, don't hesitate to ask. We aim to please."

She closed the door behind her.

I didn't gorge; I only nibbled. But fed enough to realize this was a deep, rich culture; this planet had produced some first rate minds and exceptional talents. But still, with all this to choose from, the people seemed to prefer Milton Berle. And the people were in command.

I was reading Ambrose Bierce when she came in. She looked at the book, and at me. "Lunch," she said quietly.

I put the book down, and rose. "The unwelcome guest?"

"I'd tell you, if you were."

"Would you, honestly?"

She didn't answer that. She smiled, and said, "There are some fights at Ocean Park, tonight."

We saw those, and later, some amateur fights. Strange spectacles they were, men belaboring each other, but fascinating, too. The amateurs were less talented, but more friendly, leaving the ring arm in arm, if both were still conscious. The professionals displayed no such amicability.

Why? I asked Jean. What was the difference between the amateurs and the professionals?

"Money," she said, and looked at me strangely. "Didn't you really know that?"

I lied with a nod. “I wanted you to see it, and to word it for yourself.”

“Look,” she said with controlled irritation, “if I want any curbstone philosophy, I can read one of those corny columnists. I certainly don’t have to sit in a screaming mob watching a couple of morons pound each other bloody to arrive at a stupid generality like that.”

“Let’s get a hamburger,” I said.

She just stood there, on the sidewalk. “You—you—”

People were turning to stare.

“Farmer?” I suggested.

“Oh,” she said, “oh, oh—”

“Or a cheeseburger,” I added.

There was a small crowd, now, openly watching. One man said, “Hey, this is better than them jerks inside. Slug him, lady.”

Jean started to laugh, and so did I, and then all of us were laughing, the whole crowd.

We didn’t go to a hamburger place. We went to a place where we could dance, too, and I had a small glass of wine, and wondered why we’d outgrown alcohol, on our planet.

It was a night I will never forget. It was a night I learned how much she meant to me. There wasn’t ever going to be anybody else for me, after that night.

We were married in Las Trenos at five-thirty the next morning.

And still, I didn’t tell her where I was from. When the time came, she could go back with me, but I couldn’t risk sharing that secret with her. I didn’t have the right to jeopardize my people by giving her information she might divulge unintentionally.

The world was our playground, and my study hall American first. We drove east, taking our time, while I tried to get the temper of the people. I never overlooked a chance to talk to people; the papers were no substitute for that. And between the papers and the people, I found that only the hysterics were voluble, only the biased articulate. And yet, it was a country with a liberal and progressive tradition, a country that should have been informed beyond the average.

Knowledge had been made too easy; the glib were in command.

Fear, Jars had said, and it was becoming increasingly clear to me that he was closer to it than Deering. For Deering’s viewpoint, I had a working model, I had Jean.

In the canyon city, New York, high in our room at the Empire-Hudson, she said, “You’re an awfully nosy guy, Dream Boat.”

“I like to talk to people,” I said. “Haven’t you been getting enough attention?”

“As much as I can handle,” she said. “And I’m enjoying every second of it. But it seems to be getting you down.”

“You or the people?” I asked, and mussed her hair.

She didn’t answer that. “Fred,” she said, “do you remember that day at breakfast, long ago? Do you remember asking about Ambrose Bierce and Amelia Earhart?”

“I guess I do.”

“Don’t be evasive, Fred. You know you do.”

I pulled her close. “Is this going to be a questioning period? Is this one of *those* marriages?”

“Now, Fred—” she said, against my shoulder. “Be serious, please, Fred. Please be serious—oh, you, Fred—”

We went to England. What’s that phrase they have—"muddling through"? That’s what they were doing. Proudly, with a minimum of complaint, with no thought of rebellion, with no rationalizing or projection, living as the submerged tenth lives in America, and seeming to think that—well, things *could* be worse.

In Italy, it was the kids, the beggars and procurers and thieves and even murderers who were kids. In Spain we found much of the same. In France it was all the heat and no light, charges and counter-charges, lies and counter-lies, confusion and corruption.

In Berlin, it was Russia. The cloud that darkens the world looms darkest in Berlin. The apathy that grips the world is epitomized in Berlin. A people with no sense of guilt and no reason for hope, nor stirring to the promise of a re-armed Germany. A bled and devastated people, shorn of their chief strength, their national pride.

Jean said, “I’ve seen enough. Haven’t you, Fred? How much can you take?”

“One more,” I said. “Russia.”

“Don’t be silly,” she said. “How would we get into Russia?”

“*We* wouldn’t. But *I* would.”

“Look, baby, whither though goest, I—”

“Up to here,” I said. “Who’s the big boss in this family?”

“Now, Fred—”

“Now, Jean—”

“Get away from me. This time, it won’t work. If you think that for one second you’re going into that no man’s land alone—and—”

It took some talking, to convince her, it took some lies. She’d wait, she agreed finally, in Switzerland. In comfort for a change.

It took two diamonds to get to the right man, and it took a formula from there. A formula that is learned in the first year of college chemistry on my planet, a formula for converting an element. A formula this planet couldn’t have been more than a decade short of

learning, anyway.

The last man I saw in Berlin went along, for which I was grateful, though he didn't know that. I don't speak Russian, but he did.

They were careful, they don't even trust themselves. I told Nilenoff the formula came from America, and there were more, but I needed money. I didn't tell him the fallacy in the formula; it had taken us three years to realize what it was.

My trips were limited, directed, and avoided the seamier side. I saw the modern humming factories, and the mammoth farms. No unemployment, no waste, no "capitalistic blood sucking"—and the lowest standard of living in the industrialized world. A vast, bleak land peopled with stringless puppets, with walking cadavers.

I remembered the faces of the crowds and the strangely mixed people in America, their obvious feelings, emotions and rivalries. There was nothing strange about these people of Russia—they were dead, spiritually dead.

The country that could have been a cultural and industrial center of the world was a robot-land of nine million square miles, getting ready for war, getting ready to take over the dreams of Hitler and make them come true.

I came out with a promise of ten thousand American dollars for every one of the future formulas I had assured them I could get to. I came out with the knowledge that I'd be a watched man from now on.

In Switzerland, Jean said, "Well—?"

"I'm ready to go home," I told her.

"America, you mean?"

"Where else?"

"I've been alone," she said, "and thinking. I've gone back to Sunset and Pacific Coast Highway and traced it all forward from there. And I don't think America's your home."

Very cool her voice, very tense her face. I smiled at her.

She didn't smile in return. "Fred—we're married."

"I'm glad," I said. "Aren't you?"

"It's no time for the light touch." Tears in her eyes. "Fred, are you a—a Russian spy?"

I shook my head.

"But—"

It was a clear night, and I went to the window. How it shone, in that clear air. Jean came over to stand next to me.

I pointed, and said, "There's my home."

"Venus," she said. "Fred, for heaven's sake—*I'm serious*!"

"Some day," I said, "this planet will learn how to see through our manufactured fog. Some day they will develop the vision we developed a century ago. And—"

"Damn it, Fred, be serious. If you'd know what I've gone through, alone here, thinking back on all the crazy things you've said and done. What have you told me about yourself, what do I know?"

"Nothing," I said. "And what have I asked you about yourself? It's a matter of faith, Jean."

"Faith? Running all over the country like fugitives, financed by those damned diamonds, nosing into this and into that, and then running off to Russia, all alone. *With what you'd learned, Fred?*"

I shook my head, resentment stirring in me.

"Remember when we met? In Santa Monica—right there, next to the beach. You didn't have a thing but the clothes on your back and a bagful of diamonds. Was it a sub that brought you that far, Fred?"

"No," I said, "and you wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Try me, and see," she said. She was rigid, and near hysteria.

"All right. I came there in a space sphere from Venus."

She started to sob, a wild, lonely sound and I moved forward to take her in my arms.

Her fingers clawed my face, her high heel smashed my instep. "Get out," she screamed, "get out, get out, get out—"

I got out. I went to the first floor washroom and cleaned up my bloody face, and then went into the bar. This was one habit I'd picked up on the planet.

When I came up to the suite, later, I didn't even check to see if she was in the washroom. I flopped down on the davenport and didn't know anything for the next twelve hours.

She was gone, when I came to. She'd checked out before I'd come back to the room, the night before.

I missed the plane she took from France. I missed her by a day in New York. I went back to the big house with the high pillars on Sunset Boulevard.

And she wasn't there.

She'd come back to it, I knew. I moved in, to wait. I wasn't going home without her; I wasn't even sure I was going home with her. I was involved, now, in this planet, almost as crazy as the rest of them.

I sat. I did some drinking, but mostly I sat, going back over all our days, reading nothing, enjoying nothing, just remembering.

The Korean business started and the headlines grew uglier, and the jackals screamed and the people grew more confused.

One day, the maid told me I had a visitor. I was in the library and I told her to send him back.

When he came in, he closed the door behind him. I'd never seen him, before, but he said, "We've been looking for three weeks."

"We?"

"Thirty of us," he said. "What happened? Jars sent me."

"Oh," I said. "I can't come, now. I'm—married—"

He smiled. "If you knew what a mess it's been. We've got men all over the planet. Does your wife—know?"

"She thinks I'm crazy," I said. "Look, I—"

"I'm not going to argue," he said. "Just make your report, and I'll pick it up, tonight."

Five minutes after he was gone, I was packing. I knew he wasn't coming back for any report. He was coming back for *me*, and it didn't much matter to him if I wanted to come, or not. I was coming, or staying here—dead.

What I didn't realize is that they wanted me to run, to get out where I could be taken with a minimum of interference.

They got me the other side of Blythe, in the middle of nowhere. A clear night in the desert, and headlights coming up from behind and then the big, black car crowding me off the flat road, into the sand…. And darkness.

Deering sighed and shook his head. "Corruption, Werig? Was it the corruption, or the girl?"

"I've made my report," I said. "Don't worry about them. They've got enough to worry about without worrying about us."

"Another war, it looks like," Deering said. "It could be the last one, you know. What was the girl—your wife like, Fred? Was she pretty?"

"Beautiful," I said.

"And the people—fear, is it fear?"

"I don't know. Their vice is fear, but they have some virtues."

Deering's voice was quiet. "Jars wanted me to ask you—about your wife. Where is she? Is she coming with you? It was forbidden."

"I don't know where she is, she's not coming with me, and I know it was forbidden. But where is Jars? He has been avoiding me, hasn't he? Why?"

"He has been pleading for you, before the assembly." Deering rose, and went to the window, to look out. "Who will win this war that's shaping up among the huddlers, Fred?"

"I don't know. I'm not sure I give a damn."

Deering continued to look out the window. "The gray nation, the mixed nation, this America; they have some promise of the light, have they not?"

"Some."

"But this black nation, this nation of robots, there is no chance of of light there?"

"Not under their present leaders. If they should win the war the planet would be set back five hundred years."

Deering shook his head, and turned to face me sadly. “It would be worse than that. If they should win this war shaping up, there would be no planet for them to rule.”

I stared at him, not believing, still so bound up in my trip I couldn’t believe his words. *Love,—faith, fear, Jean*—were running through my mind. And Jean…?

Deering answered everything for me. “We can’t take the chance,” he said. “We will abolish the planet. The assembly so decided this morning.”

NEW HIRE
By Dave Dryfoos
Illustrated by Balbalis

Very admirable rule: Never do tomorrow what you can put off until after the age of forty!

One thing about an electronic awakener: no matter how elaborate its hookup, melodious its music, and important its announced reminders, when it goes on in the morning you can always turn it off again. Boswell W. Budge always did exactly that.

But there's no turning off one's kids, and thus, on the most important morning of his life, February 30, 2054, Bozzy arose, much against his will, promptly at 0800.

His Sophie, eight and ladylike, merely shook the bed with a disdainful gesture. But Howard, six, masculine, and athletic, climbed right up and sat on Bozzy's stomach. Baby Ralph, of the golden smile, gave Bozzy a big kiss, and Bozzy thus shared the gold, which was egg.

"Did your mother send you in here?" Bozzy demanded, gazing suspiciously around with one eye open.

"We came because we love you," Sophie answered.

That opened Bozzy's other eye. "Thank you, dear," he said. "You're very sweet or very clever. Now if you'll coax Howard off my stomach—"

"I don't have to be coaxed," Howard announced, sliding to the floor with all the covers. "From now on, you just order me, Daddy. Because you'll be a Senior Citizen tomorrow."

Bozzy didn't want to think of that just then. "Tell your mother I'm up," he said. "And get out so I can bathe and dress."

Sophie minced, Howard ran, Ralph toddled.

Bozzy rose, a pudgy man slightly under average height at six feet two, with blue eyes and thinning brown hair. He was exactly thirty-nine years, eleven months, and twenty-nine days old.

And that was the point. At forty, he would have to go to work. This was his day for job-taking.

He dreaded it.

He put the coming ceremonies out of his mind and concentrated on his supersonic bath, the depilatory cream, the color of his outer clothing. It took time to achieve the right shade of purple in the bathroom plastic-dispenser, but no time at all to pour, solidify, and

cut the sheet-like robe required for the occasion.

In it, he was the sensation of the breakfast room, handsome as a male bird in spring plumage. Kate, his slender wife, who had been up and at work for an hour, looked moth-eaten by comparison, as if their nest had been lined with her plucked-out down.

"You look very attractive this morning, Kate," Bozzy told her. He gave her an extra-warm kiss.

"Well!" she said. "Quite the gallant today, aren't we? Just be sure you're on time today, darling. Remember what Mr. Frewne had to say about promptness."

Frewne. That overinflated windbag. The obesity who was about to become his boss. Without having worked a day in his life, Bozzy found he hated the idea of having a boss.

"Let's think of something pleasant," he grunted, and thought of breakfast.

He took his place at the table. Kate and the kids had already eaten, so Kate served, while the kids, attracted by his finery, stood off and watched him swallow a vitamin pill, a thyroid pill, and a Dexedrine pill.

Solemnly, he opened the three eggs Kate brought. Each was guaranteed by her to have been irradiated for exactly two minutes and fifty-five seconds, and guaranteed by the grocer to have been enriched by feeding the hens three kinds of mold.

His mouth was full of the third and last one when Sophie asked, "Why do you have to go to work, Daddy?"

The reminder choked him. Gulping, he said, "To support us all, honey. My pension stops tomorrow."

"Yes, but I read in a book where people used to go to work when they were young."

He was tempted to say, "I *am* young!" but thought better of it. "That was long ago, dear."

"Were people different then?"

"No, but society was. Our Senior Citizens used to be pensioned off, while younger people worked. But when science improved the Seniors' health, they got tired of sitting in corners on pensions and, besides, a lot of them died soon after they stopped working. When it got so that more than half of all voters were between forty and seventy years old, the Seniors voted their pensions to the young, to get educated and raise families on, and nobody's allowed to work till he's forty. Now do you see?"

"Forty is awful old," said Sophie.

Howard had meanwhile taken his mother's hand. "*You're* not going to work, are you, Mommy?" he asked.

"Not for ten years, dear. I'll be here when you want me, so why don't you go play on the balcony? I've got to get Daddy off and give Ralph his bath."

"I'll bathe him," Sophie volunteered. "You help, Howie. We can make like we're young."

"Don't drop him," Kate warned.

"Clean up the bathroom afterward," added Bozzy.

"Yes, sir," said Howard, for the first time in his life.

The children left, and Kate came close to pour Bozzy his cup of Daystart. He slipped an arm around her waist and squeezed convulsively.

"Darling!" she said, stroking his bald spot. "You're positively trembling!"

"Wouldn't you be, if you had to take over from somebody you like as well as I like Mr. Kojac? And for no good reason, except he's seventy-five and I'll soon be forty."

Kate pushed away from him, frowning. "Sometimes you're so silly, it scares me. You know perfectly well that if you don't take Mr. Kojac's job, someone else will. He'd rather have it in your hands than in a stranger's, and I'd rather live on his income than on a laborer's. So stop moping and drink your Daystart, while I call a cab."

No help in that quarter, Bozzy decided as she left. All Kate could think of was that she'd soon be the wife of a big-shot: the manager—that is, controls setter—of a furniture factory.

Bozzy had never told her how simple the job really was, though he supposed she knew.

You first ordered designs, and then you ordered a poll taken on the designs. A computer tabulated the poll's results and pointed out the design most likely to sell.

You then fed economic data into the same computer, and found out how many units the market could take. You called in the engineers to set up the machines, and the maintenance men to keep them running. In brief, you were errand boy to a bunch of gadgets, with nothing to do but look important.

He was practicing his important look when Kate bustled in and spoiled it by sitting on his lap.

"You're going to do fine today," she said, "and you're going to get off to a good start. I made them show me your cab. It's one of their brand-new battery-electric ones, a sort of mauve that will go with your purple robe. You'll look swell in it."

Bozzy was kissing her when the lobby buzzer sounded three long rings.

"There's your cab," Kate said, rising.

He followed her to the living room. Projected on one wall was a picture of the cabman facing the lobby annunciator, fifty-three stories down. The man was tall, fat, and in need of a shave, yet he wore purple tights with pink and green trim.

Bozzy shuddered. “Who in the world concocted that rig?”

“Your wife, sir,” the cabman answered.

“It’s beautiful,” said Bozzy. “I’ll be right down.”

He wasn’t, though. Kate told the kids he was leaving, and they trooped out of the bathroom to say good-by.

Bozzy could tell Ralph was the one being bathed only because he was naked—all three were equally wet, and equally anxious to embrace their Daddy. He had to make himself a new robe while the cab meter ticked and Kate jittered.

But once started, the drive between balconied buildings and intervening plazas went fast enough. Bozzy wasn’t over half an hour late in reaching Mr. Kojac’s apartment building.

The old man waited in the street, looking spare, spruce, and impatient.

“I do wish,” he said, easing himself into the cab, “that you had a less anti-social attitude. Now you’ll have to claim I delayed you.”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Bozzy mumbled. “It’s kind of you to take the blame.”

He thought it was also typical. He had understudied Mr. Kojac for the preceding two years, and felt there was no one else in the world for whom he could have as much respect.

“Actually, sir,” he explained, “I was delayed by the children.”

“An excuse, Boswell! Whether conscious or subconscious, nothing more than an excuse! Distaste for today’s ceremonial is smeared over your face like so much bread-and-jelly.”

Unconsciously, Bozzy wiped his cheeks.

Mr. Kojac laughed. “You’re guilt-ridden and that’s plain absurd. All young men in your position have to go through exactly the same thing. You must simply make up your mind to do what society requires.”

“All I can think of is your kindness,” Bozzy blurted. “People should replace those they hate!”

“But the understudy system wouldn’t work, then,” Mr. Kojac pointed out. “You can’t learn from a man who upsets you.”

Bozzy nodded miserably.

In silence, he let himself be carried toward the furniture factory, till Mr. Kojac asked, “Did you bring the stimulants?”

“Oh, yes, sir. Excuse me. I should have offered them sooner.” With embarrassed clumsiness, he fished from a pocket in his under-

wear the pills required by custom. “Here you are, sir,” he said in ritual form. “Big pills make troubles little.”

Mr. Kojac smiled. “I don’t need any,” he said gently. “You do. Take one.”

“That isn’t proper!”

“No one will know. Go ahead.”

He would feel like a fool to take a pill brought only for Mr. Kojac’s use. He would feel much more like a fool if he broke down during the ceremony—might even lose his job.

He took the pill, finally, and immediately felt sorry. He was still tense and twitchy when they reached the factory.

As custom demanded, everyone was out of sight. Nobody met them at the gate, or observed their silent progress up the escalator to the personnel office. Noiselessly, through empty soundproof offices, they walked together to the ceremonial chamber.

The door they used was the room’s only entrance. It was hooked open invitingly. Within was a small conference table of imitation oak, and six chairs of imitation leather. Ceiling, walls, and floor were plastic sheets in soft, sandy shades that harmonized with the furniture’s rich browns.

On the table were four wristlets, four anklets, and two belts, all made of iron links and stamped with either Bozzy’s or Mr. Kojac’s name. As he had been told to do, Bozzy picked out and put on his own set while Mr. Kojac rested in the armchair at the head of the table. Then, breathing noisily, he knelt before Mr. Kojac and fastened the old man’s anklets.

He rose, grunting. Mr. Kojac held out first the left hand, then the right, while Bozzy put the wristlets on him. Their cheeks accidentally touched while Bozzy fastened the belt. He thought of his father and was irrationally tempted to plant a kiss, as if he were four instead of forty.

He stifled the impulse and shook hands instead.

“Good luck,” Mr. Kojac said.

The procedure did not call for that remark, and so, for a second, Bozzy forgot what came next. Then, helped by the stimulant pill, he focused his thoughts, crossed the room, and turned a lighted red switch that glowed by the door.

He heard a muffled clank as iron links froze to the magnetized armchair, sounding the signal for his speech.

"Sir," he intoned, "the Company takes this opportunity to express its deep and heart-felt appreciation of the thirty-five years you have devoted to serving the Company, the furniture industry generally, and that great public, our customers."

Without looking at Mr. Kojac, he bowed, turned, went out, and released the catch holding the door open. It closed automatically, and automatically set in motion the rest of the ceremony.

From somewhere out of sight, fat Mr. Frewne waddled over and briefly shook Bozzy's hand.

"You've done fine," he wheezed. "A little late getting started, but that's to be expected. Every-thing's fine—just fine!"

Praise seemed a miscue. Bozzy didn't quite know how to answer.

"Sir," he asked, mopping his forehead, "what about Mr. Kojac?"

"Oh, he's all right," Mr. Frewne said. "Those fumes are fast. We can leave the rest to the undertaker."

He slapped Bozzy on the back and pushed him down the corridor. "Come on into my office, boy. I'll pour you a drink—pour us each one, as a matter of fact. And hand over your iron jewelry, son. You won't need that stuff again for thirty-five years."

ALL THAT GOES UP

By Kirby Brooks
Illustrated By Smith

At fifty, a man should be too old to go around flying off the handle, or wandering around on the ceiling. But what could a man do when he had a son who insisted on being a genius?

For a man my age, the middle 50's, life has a number of compensations. There're children—we have two; there's a good wife, and I'm certainly blessed in that respect with Mary; and there's the joy of coming home, slipping on my slippers, having a good dinner, then relaxing with coffee and a pipe. There's no compensation for being plastered to the ceiling. But, more of that later.

The after dinner coffee with a dash of rum in it, tasted very good, and so did the pipe. The meal was satisfying too. Thank goodness for that meal, because it was the last decent one I've had for quite some time. Oh, I've eaten all right, but you'd have to stretch your imagination to call any of it a meal. Can you picture eating food that keeps trying to move away from your face? That is, if you can keep the plate from moving away too?

As I say, Mary and I had just finished dinner, when Jim, our 22-year-old gangly son, who's home on summer vacation from MIT, called me.

"Can you come here a minute, Dad?"

"Sure," I said, heading down the hall to his combination laboratory, dark room, aviary, and just plain bedroom. Fortunately it was a big room so there was space for a bed in addition to all the stuff a boy can collect who becomes enamored of science while in High School, and who consummates the wedding with studying electronics in college.

I pushed his door open a little wider and looked in before entering; a trick the family had acquired when Jim was in the Zoological-Biological, or frog-collecting age. “What do you want, son?”

“Just want to show you something,” he said, pointing to the floor. He was bent over looking intently at what seemed to be a sheet of that fluorescent plastic that’s used for signs. It was lying on the floor, was about two feet square, and was glowing a dim pink. Whether from light within itself, or from the desk lamp, I couldn’t tell.

“What is it?”

“I don’t really know, Dad, but watch what happens.” So saying, he picked up a glove from the desk, tossed it onto the plastic plate. I should say he tossed it *at* the plate, because it didn’t land, but rose fast, straight up! I watched it hit the ceiling with a splat! Where it stuck. It was then I noticed several other things all plastered to the panelling too; the mate to the glove, a package of cigarettes, a cigarette lighter and a golf ball or two.

Well, I had learned years ago in the Prestidigitation Age, or, “You too can amaze your friends with feats of Magic” that quite often Jim would go to great lengths to mystify anybody handy. I wasn’t too impressed.

“Next thing will be to make a rope stand up, or saw a woman in half, I suppose?”

“No, Dad, this is no trick. Fact is, I think I’ve stumbled onto something that could be important… anti-gravity. Or, something that looks like it.”

“Well,” I said, “It could be, but just what is this thing?”

“Up at school I started fooling around with various metals, and one idea I had was to suspend them in tiny particles, colloidally

almost, in plastic. Then I'd run various voltages and varying frequencies through the plastic."

"Yes, but why?"

"Well, the thing I had in mind originally was a wall or ceiling panel that would serve as a source of either cold light using a given voltage and frequency, or as a source of radiant heat, using some other voltage and frequency. All from the same panel."

"And you wind up with this?"

"Yes, and I'll be darned if I can explain just what this is. I'm really going to have to do some digging."

While Jim was talking, I had been looking the rig over. It consisted of the plastic plate lying on the floor, with two sets of wires running into it, and out of it. In turn, these four wires led into what I took to be a transformer of some sort. Such as you'd use for a toy electric train. It had roughly calibrated dials on the top of it. A regular AC line from the transformer was plugged into the wall socket.

"What I can't figure," Jim mused, "Is why it does what it does. The measly three years I've spent at school don't even qualify me to make a good guess. Does it only work on small things that can be lifted without too much effort anyway? Or, if I increase the size of the plate will I also have to increase the voltage? Will it…?"

"Look boy, I'm confused enough already. What do you say we sit down and think about this a bit? It'll give you a chance to collect your wits, and besides that, I want another cup of coffee."

Four cups and two pipes later, after Johnny, that's our fourteen-year-old, and Mary had gone to bed, Jim and I were still just sitting. He was obviously thinking, and I was mostly sitting. Not much thinking. The trouble with my thinking was that a background of selling everything from Encyclopedias to, at present, used cars, and an education consisting mostly of high school and hard knocks just didn't qualify me in Jim's league. The silence lengthened. Pretty soon he stirred in his chair, cleared his throat and said, "Let's go look again."

"Have you come to any conclusions?"

"Well, yes and no," Jim said. "Look at it this way Pop; suppose this is not a fluke and I'm able to duplicate this thing. Suppose I'm able to take this transformer and duplicate it too. All on a larger scale. How could it be used to good advantage? It'd probably do away with elevators in most cases, except you'd have to walk down. But then, by making the field weaker, maybe I could fix it so's you'd float down. Then too, I wonder if it can be applied to aircraft of any kind… I suppose you could take it and…" his eyes were shining.

I interrupted; "Jim, you haven't really tested what the thing will do and it *is* late, so before you go into many more schemes, let's sleep

on it. We can get right after it in the morning. You can, that is, because all I can do is watch."

The next morning bright and early I was awakened by Johnny, who was dancing around the room, shouting something on the order of "Hey! Somebody's gottoget'erdown! Somebody's gottoget'erdown!"

Making myself heard over the din, I hollered, "Who's got to get who down? For Pete's sake, stop yelling so loud!"

Having been out-shouted, Johnny calmed down enough to catch his breath and gasp, "Say, Dad, Duchess is in Jim's room and she's on the ceiling, and yougottoget'erdown!"

Well, it dawned on me then what he was talking about. Duchess is our nine-months-old Great Dane pup. Weighs about a hundred pounds. So, pulling on bathrobe and slippers, I went down stairs, and hurried into Jim's room. Sure enough, plastered on the ceiling and looking mighty scared and sick and sheepish was Duchess. When I came in she wagged a feeble tail at me and squirmed a bit. Mary, Johnny and Jim were all standing looking at her.

"Dad, I don't know how it happened," Jim said. "Guess I forgot to pull the plug last night. First I knew was when I heard a thump and a yelp… woke up and she was practically right over my bed."

Duchess was apparently unhurt, so I walked over and reached up to coax her down. Just then Jim shouted, "Dad! Don't do…!" And my head hit the ceiling! Like a fool I had walked right over the plastic plate!

As soon as I could get my eyes to focus properly, I shut them again quickly. I was lying, (lying!) next to Duchess, on the ceiling, and she was thrashing me in the face with her tail. As soon as I pushed her around so my face was out of range I could see the dumbfounded looks on the rest of the family.

"Ralph," said Mary, in a tone of exasperation, "You and that dog come right down from there this minute!"

"Honey, I'd just be delighted to come down there, and if you and the boys will shove that bed under us, we'll try. Soon as Jim turns this damn thing off."

By this time, Johnny was lying on the floor about to bust a gusset laughing at his father and long-legged Duchess sprawled on the ceiling, and even Jim, who is always rather straight-faced, was beginning to grin a little around the edges. Mary still seemed convinced that Duchess and I had done it on purpose.

Jim finally gathered his wits enough to start pushing the bed under us. Between the three of them they managed to bypass the wires to the plastic plate and set the bed over it. I noticed that it bucked a little as the edge went over the plate, but I didn't get time to

see much because no sooner had the bed been pushed over it than the whole thing with the exception of the frame, rose straight up and smothered the dog and me very effectively! After the first moment of panic, consisting of flailing arms, legs, muffled barks and curses, I was able to shove the bedding aside so we could breathe again. I had just started to yell at Jim to turn the thing off and stand aside, when that's just what he did. I clutched at Duchess, hoping to break both our falls I guess, but nothing happened!

I looked at Jim, and he was looking at the plug in his hand. There was a dazed look on his face, and I'm sure there was one on mine too. Duchess just licked my face and wagged her tail. For a space of about two breaths no one spoke, then all started at once….

"Jim, you pull out that plug right now and get your father down from there!" That was Mary.

"Don't just stand there like a dope… turn that damn thing off!" That was me.

"Jimmy, where's your camera? I want to get a picture of this!" That was Johnny.

Duchess just whined, and wagged her tail apologetically.

"Jim," I said, very softly, "Will you please stop messing around and get us down from here?"

"I unplugged it, Dad… I don't know why you're still up there." He shook his head.

Johnny, bless his little heart, had what seemed to be a good idea; "Why not get hold of the wires and pull the plate out from under them?"

So Jim eased up to within about a foot of the plate, grabbed the wires and started pulling. I had no sensation at all. We just stuck there. Even with the plate out in the hall!

Jim stood for a moment in thought, then looked up at us and said, "Well, maybe it'll wear off in a little while, as you gradually discharge whatever kind of charge you got from the plate."

"What do you mean by 'charge'?" I asked.

"Well, not knowing what kind of field I generated with that plate, I couldn't tell you offhand, but it is probably something like this; you see, apparently what I did was not cut gravity off exactly, but changed the normal electrical charge in whatever object came into the field. Seems to me if I had cut gravity with the plate, you would have fallen when I turned it off. As it is, you're still there," he added rather unnecessarily.

And Jim, as his teen-age friends used to say, wasn't just whistling Dixie. We were definitely, unquestionably still there.

About this time I became aware of a pain in the small of my back.

For a man who is pushing 60, I'm in pretty good shape except for my sacroiliac. Just my luck, I thought. Here I am, plastered to the ceiling, and that thing has to start acting up. In moving a bit though, I heard a scraping sound and found I had more than one pain in my back. Feeling carefully under me, I found that it wasn't the sacroiliac at all, but a cigarette lighter, two gloves, a pack of cigarettes, and two golf balls. I tried to toss the balls down to the floor and all they did was go almost down then curve right back up and bounce on the ceiling, where they settled. I tried the same thing with the gloves and back they came too. So I lit one of the cigarettes, even without my morning coffee.

Mary had been silent for awhile, but apparently she had the same thought. "Ralph, aren't you coming down for breakfast?" she asked, pleadingly.

"I don't know, honey. But I do know I'm sure getting hungry, even in this position." And turning so I could see her better, if you can turn while lying on the ceiling looking down, I said, "Do you suppose you could whip up something to eat? And maybe put it on a pole so you could hand it up?" She allowed as how she could, but Jim, who had been in one of his brown studies again spoke up; "I don't believe we'll need a pole, Dad. Now that the plastic plate's been turned off and moved, everything's all right."

"Everything's all right!" I growled. "If everything's so all right, why don't we come down? How long's it going to take, anyway?"

"Well, it's hard to say," Jim shrugged. "In fact, I've been thinking maybe I ought to call Professor Jordan up at school and ask him what to do."

"Is he an expert?"

"Well, I'd call him that. The trouble is, I don't know what I did, so I certainly don't know how to un-do it. Maybe he'll have an idea."

"Does he know about anti-gravity?"

"I don't imagine so, but he's the head of electronics and I know he's been working on the unified field theory just as a hobby. He's the fellow who got me to wondering about energized metal particles in colloidal suspension. Think I'd better call him?"

"Son," I said, trying to retie my bathrobe belt, "You not only call him, but if it's possible, get him to come here…. I've got to get down. Hell, I haven't even shaved yet this morning, and I've got to be at work in about two hours."

"You may not get down from there that soon, but I'll go call him right now."

Jim left for the phone, and shortly Mary came in with a steaming tray of food. That's where the fun began.

First of all, picture the old house. It was very old, and had high, pine-paneled ceilings… probably twelve feet high. Duchess and I were a little off-center, closer to the door, I guess. The room was big, and being on the ground floor, had a dormer window looking out on our rather scraggly garden. In fact, pretty soon I began to get the impression from the pine "boards" "beneath" me, that I was actually lying on a floor, and the ceiling to floor dormer window didn't do anything to help either. Curtains looked rather odd though, sticking straight "up."

About the food: Mary was right under us with the tray. She put it down, picked up a bowl of oatmeal and started to hand it to me. She couldn't reach high enough and I couldn't reach down far enough. The thought crossed my mind, "why not stand up?" Well, I tried it, Brother! What a sensation! As I began gathering my legs under me, the idea of being on a pine floor increased. Increased until I made the mistake of looking out the window! It's just plain impossible to describe, but try to imagine how it would look right now, if you looked out your window… at the top (to you) is the ground, and at the bottom? Nothing! Just nothing, but blue sky. The vertigo was pretty bad and I flopped back down, or rather "up" and tried to regain my equilibrium.

"What's the matter?" my wife asked. "Don't you want any breakfast?"

As soon as I caught my breath, I said, "Well, yes and no, honey. Could you or Johnny get a ladder? I think that might do it." I could stay lying down that way.

Johnny brought in the short stepladder, so without standing "up" I at least got my hands on the food. Hands is about all. Here's a picture for you…. Flat on your back; an open dish of hot oatmeal open side to, coming right at you. When you grab it you have to reach around behind it to keep it from falling. You get it right up to your face, take the spoon and start to take a bite. How do you do it? I don't know either. I gave up oatmeal right then and there. Johnny, and again, bless his little heart, had the idea that saved us. "Hey, Dad, why don't you try a banana?" It worked! In fact, most any food that was in a chunk could be eaten. Difficult, but it could be done. The big problem then was liquid, and again Johnny came to my rescue with some fountain straws from the corner drugstore. For Duchess it was easy. She just lapped.

About the time we finished the battle of breakfast, Jim came back with word from Professor Jordan.

"Dad, I don't think the professor believed me, but he's on his way here."

"Well, thank the Lord," I exclaimed. "Did he think you were completely out of your head?"

"Not exactly, but he did think I might be exaggerating just a little, I think."

"When will he get here?" Mary asked.

"He said he'd catch a plane out of there as soon as he could, and it's only a two and a half hour flight, mother."

"Then he'll be here this afternoon?" I asked.

"He seemed to think he would."

"Oh, goodness, I hope so," Mary said. "We've got a date with the Ripleys to go to a movie tonight."

I snorted. "Movies at a time like this! Why it might take days for us to get discharged."

Days? Holy Smoke! I wondered how long it *would* take? Already, I was getting tired of lying down. Hey, wait a minute! What about the springs, mattress and covers stuck up here with me? There indeed was a thought.

Pushing Duchess aside and getting licked in the face once again for my trouble, I reached over and got hold of the mattress. In doing so I had to roll over partially. I really got the sensation then of being on a pine board floor. So much so in fact, that I rolled clear over onto my hands and knees. It wasn't so bad after all! Just like being on a regular floor, reaching for a mattress and covers. Really had to keep my eyes away from that window though!

I finally got the bed straightened out and got comfortable. Duchess, no doubt figuring this was a rather special occasion, proceeded to ease herself in bed with me. At that point I didn't care too much so I let her stay. It was a funny thing but she didn't seem to have much trouble standing up at all. In fact, she seemed perfectly happy with the whole arrangement, but every-time I glanced at that dormer window and pictured vast reaches of blue nothing, my stomach turned over a little.

Guess I must have dozed off, because the next thing I remember was Johnny standing on the ladder, poking me with a tennis racquet.

"Wake up Dad," he was saying. "Mother wants to know if you and Duchess want any lunch."

"I don't know about Duchess," I yawned, "But I could certainly do with a bit to eat. Like to shave and brush my teeth too. Think you could figure out something?"

Johnny figured, and oddly enough it's no trick to brush your teeth (I'm lucky to still have my own) upside down. It's much the same as when you do it normally… bent over the lavatory. As for shaving, well I never cared much for them, but I used Jim's electric razor and that

was taken care of. No shower though. Not even Johnny could figure that one out.

Mary came in with sandwiches and coffee, and with straws it turned out all right. Duchess did her usual lapping. There wasn't anything else to do but wait, so Johnny brought me the morning paper. Let me tell you, that's no snap, trying to read a paper that's continually trying to pull away from you. My arms got awfully tired after awhile so I gave that up. Noticing it was rather stuffy, I asked Johnny to lower the upper sash of the dormer so the air could circulate a bit, and as it became more comfortable, I must have dropped off to sleep again.

The next thing I knew I was awakened rather forcibly by loud screams and yells from the garden just outside the window. When I got my wits together and looked, the first thing I noticed was that Duchess was nowhere around. About that time, Johnny burst into the room, tears streaming down his face, and crying as though his heart would break. Close on his heels was Mary, also crying, and Jim was bringing up the rear.

"What in the world's the matter?" I asked.

"Oh, Ralph," Mary sobbed, "It's Duchess… she's gone!"

"She just flew right up in the air!" Johnny added.

"What do you mean, 'flew right up in the air', what are you all talking about?"

"She got out of the window, Dad," Jim said. "We were out in the garden talking, and I guess she heard us. Looks like she went to the window, scratched the screen loose, and out she went."

"Oh, Ralph, it was just horrible," Mary sobbed. "That poor thing, going up just like a balloon… getting smaller and smaller."

"Yeah, Dad," Johnny sniffed, "We watched her till she went clear out of sight… she was kickin' her legs and we could hear her barkin' too."

"For heaven's sake, Ralph," Mary cried, "don't you go near that window!"

"Yes, you'd go up too, Dad," Jim added.

Clutching tightly to the mattress, I assured them I wouldn't go near the window, or the door either, for that matter. Just the thought of that poor dog sailing up in the air made me sick in the pit of my stomach.

"How high will she go, Jim?" I asked.

"Gee, I don't know, Dad. But I think she'll just keep right on going, clear up out of the air." Jim had a hard time keeping a sob out of his voice too.

"What'll happen to her, son?"

"Well, you see, between the cold and the lack of oxygen, she'll just go to sleep…. I remember reading about fliers at high altitude."

"Thank Heaven," Mary breathed. And I added a silent "Amen."

About 3:30 Professor Jordan arrived and Jim brought him in and introduced us. The professor was probably 40, but looked hardly older than Jim, and was built along the same tall and gangly lines. A very business-like man though, thank heaven, and he got right to the point. After the first shock of seeing me on the ceiling, he turned to Jim, "Now, tell me. Exactly what happened, and what is this rig you have here?"

Jim told him the whole story of how Duchess and I got caught, then went into great detail about the plastic plate, the kinds of metal he had used, and the different settings on the transformer. He finished by telling how Duchess had sailed off into space.

At this, Professor Jordan looked more closely at the transformer hookup. "You say the settings are still the same?"

"Yes, sir, it's still the same. I haven't changed a thing except to pull the plate out in the hall."

"Have you tried it since your father was caught?"

"No, sir… in all the excitement I haven't gotten around to fooling with it again."

The professor walked out in the hall, reached in his pocket for a handkerchief, tossed it over the plate. It rose! Straight up, and stuck to the ceiling!

"My gosh!" Jim blurted. "Somebody must have plugged that thing in again!"

Mary and Johnny, who were watching in silence, both spoke up to say that neither of them had. Jim reached down and picked up the AC line. Sure enough, it *wasn't* plugged in!

"Well, this is going to take some studying," Professor Jordan muttered, looking rather awed at Jim's gadget. "Jim, let's start at the beginning again, and be sure you tell me everything you did, every move you made, what kind of metal you used, how finely divided it was, what concentration you used and what voltages and frequencies you used."

"I'll try, Professor," Jim said, "But it's going to be sort of a hit or miss proposition because I fiddled with this thing for an hour or so before accidentally dropping my cigarettes on the plate. When they went up, I was surprised, to say the least, so I tried other things."

"What we've got to figure put first of all, is whether it was caused by a combination of changes, or whether it was the last setting you used," Professor Jordan said. "If it was a combination of voltage and frequency changes, then we've certainly got a problem on our hands."

All this time of course, Mary and Johnny had been standing more or less open-mouthed, listening, and I, from my vantage point high on the ceiling, had been taking it all in too.

"Can you think of any way to run the experiment over?" The professor asked. "Do you think you can remember the formula for the plastic plate?"

Jim thought a moment, snapped his fingers and said, "By golly, I believe I've got another piece of that plastic around here somewhere. I made it up at school and had to cut a little piece off so I could get it in my suitcase. I'll see if I can find it." And stepping gingerly around the plate in the hall he came back into the room and started rummaging around in his luggage.

The professor looked at me. "Mr. Wilson, what sort of sensation did you have when you stepped on the plate?"

"Well, as near as I can remember, I *don't* remember," I said. "I started to reach up and pull Duchess down, and the next thing I knew my head hit the ceiling. Still got a bump big as an Easter egg."

"Did you have a giddy, light sensation?"

"No, as I say, I don't remember anything but the whack on the head."

About that time, Jim hollered, "Hey! I found it! Now maybe we can find out what goes on here."

Jim and the professor very carefully disconnected the transformer from the plate in the hall, made sure the dial settings were the same, then hooked up the new plate. It was a lot smaller than the first one, being only about six inches wide and two feet long.

"I wonder if shape has anything to do with it?" the professor mused.

"We'll find out in a minute," said Jim. "Everybody stand back now, and I'll plug in the transformer."

He plugged it in and in a few seconds the plate began to glow the same as the other one. "We'll give it a few more seconds," Jim said, "then we'll see if it works."

The professor fumbled around in his pockets, started to toss his pipe onto the plate, thought better of it and put it back in his pocket. Johnny, who had been watching the whole proceedings, pulled out his Boy Scout knife. "You can use this, Professor."

Professor Jordan took the knife, got up close to the plate, gave it a toss, and plunk! It flew over the plate and went straight to the ceiling! And stuck!

"Well, thank goodness, we know it's the present combination of voltage and frequency, and not a series of changes," Jim said, relieved.

"Yes, and size and shape apparently have little to do with it too," the professor answered. "Now all we have to do is find out why. That's our problem."

"And how long it lasts too," said Jim, glancing up at me. Then turning to the professor; "Sir, I've been wondering what you think of the idea that maybe these plates change the electrical charge of whatever object is placed on them, or over them."

"I had that thought too, Jim, when I found out we couldn't turn that plate off. Any ideas how we might go about grounding or dissipating the charge?"

"Or getting me down from here? I don't know if you or Jim realize it, but old Mother Nature is going to make things rather uncomfortable for me pretty soon. I've been up here for almost eight hours already, and I'm getting a bit uneasy, to say the least."

For the first time the professor's eyes crinkled a bit at the corners, and looking up at me, he chuckled, "Mr. Wilson, you've brought up a rather touchy subject, and we'll hurry as fast as we can."

Mary came in then with some more sandwiches and coffee, and I went through the same routine with the straw, only this time I got choked. Thank Heaven I did! That sounds funny, but while I was coughing and sputtering, spewing coffee all over the place, Jim had walked over so that he was right under me. He stood for a moment watching me sputter, then let out a whoop and hollered.

"Hey! Dad! Professor! Mom! I've got it! I've got it." He paused a second, then, "I hope…."

I was still sputtering, but Mary and Professor Jordan both grabbed him and started asking questions…. "What are you talking about? What's your idea?"

"Professor, did you see what happened to the coffee?"

"Your father got choked, why?"

"When he sputtered, did you see what happened? The coffee went *up*!"

"Well, yes, it did. But I don't see…. By jove! Wait a minute! I see what you're driving at!" And turning to Mary, the professor added, "Mrs. Wilson, do you have a garden hose long enough to reach into this room?"

Mary was shocked. I was still listening between sputters.

"Why, yes, we have. What are you going to do?"

"I hate to tell you this, Mother," Jim said, "But if Professor Jordan is going to do what I think he's going to do, you're not going to be very happy about it. Neither is Dad."

"But we hope to get Mr. Wilson down," the professor said, "Even though it may get a little damp in here."

"If you can get Ralph down, I won't mind how damp it gets," said Mary. And turning to Johnny, who was standing open-mouthed, "Johnny, will you hook up the hose?"

"Yes, Johnny, and run it through the window so it'll come inside the room," Jim explained, quickly.

This whole thing sounded like Greek to me, but by now I had recovered from the sputtering spell, and if a garden hose run through the bedroom window would get me down I was certainly in favor of it. "Will this garden hose scheme you both seem to have thought of really work?"

"We hope so, Dad. It's going to make a mess in my room, but it's worth a try."

"What do I do, climb down it?"

"In effect you do," said the professor. "We'll know in a little while, I hope."

"Will someone unhook the screen?" Johnny was outside.

Jim unhooked the screen and pulled the hose into the room. "Do you want to try it, Professor?"

"Yes, but first, let's clear things out of the way."

"Hey!" I hollered. "You're not going to turn that hose on in here are you?"

The professor chuckled. "Hope you don't mind too much, but we hope it'll get you down."

"Well, I sure don't see…."

"Dad, the professor and I had the same idea. Maybe I can explain it… you see, apparently anything you come in contact with takes on a bit of your 'charge.' In the case of the coffee, the small drops became charged and went up. I imagine that the plates and cups picked up a small charge too, while you held them, but it wasn't enough to make them rise. Is that about right, Professor?"

"It seems that way, Jim. Anyway, it's worth a try." The professor looked up at me, "Mr. Wilson, I'm afraid you aren't going to care much for this. As soon as we clear the room a bit I'm going to turn the hose on you."

My mouth dropped open. "Turn the ho…?"

"Yes…. You see, if whatever you touch picks up a bit of the charge, then about the quickest way to 'discharge' you would be to touch you with a large volume of something. Water sounds logical, doesn't it?"

"Well, I suppose so," I mumbled. "But, there must be something… some other way…."

"There may be, Dad," Jim said, "but you want to get down from there fast, don't you? OK! Here we go!"

So, Jim turned the water on and in a few minutes of course, I was soaked through my bathrobe and pajamas, right to the skin. Johnny was looking through the window laughing fit to kill, and with a look of horror on her face, Mary was watching the water cascading across the ceiling and down into the room. Jim and Professor Jordan were watching me like hawks. Waiting for me to fall, I guess. Fortunately the weather was warm, because the water certainly wasn't. This must have gone on for an hour, but it apparently wasn't, because when they turned the water off, Jim said to the professor, "I hope you timed that, sir. I forgot to."

The professor had, and it turned out to be about ten minutes. He looked up at me, "Do you feel any lighter?"

"What do you mean, lighter?"

He grinned. "I mean can you push yourself away from the ceiling?"

I rolled over on my side and tried to push. By golly! I *did* seem to move a little easier! "I may be a little lighter, Professor, or maybe it's my imagination, but turn that hose on again!"

Splat! On it came, and it's been on and off and on and off for, let me see, this must be the third day now. And I don't mind telling you I'm not going to need a bath for at least two months when I get down. When I get down! Do you know where I am right now? I'm about two feet from the ceiling, which puts me still ten feet from the floor… hanging there in the air like the assistant to an Indian fakir! Only this is no trick.

Oh, it's not so bad now; I'm wearing swimming trunks and Jim and Professor Jordan with the assistance of Johnny and Mary, rigged a sort of trough arrangement to carry the 'charged' water out of the window and up into the sky. The water that didn't pick up a charge and fell to the floor is being pumped out the window with a hand pump. Oh, yes, they had to dam up the doorway to keep the rest of the house from being inundated. And I shudder every time I think how much damage has been done to Jim's bedroom. I'm coming down though, slowly, and Professor Jordan has it figured that at the present rate it's going to take five to six more days. I don't know how he came to that conclusion, but I sure hope he's right and hasn't underestimated. The constant soaking has my skin looking like damp corduroy. All over too.

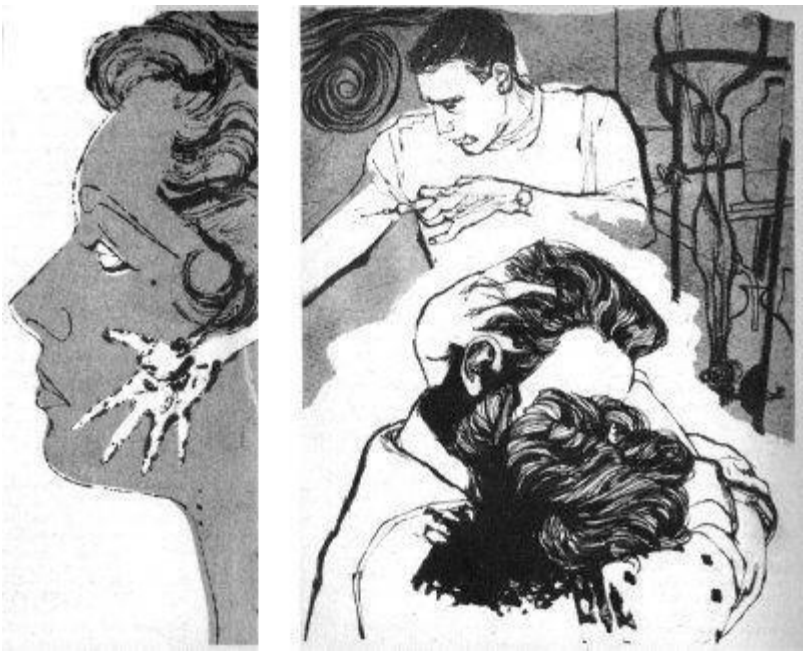
What about the transformer and plate? Well, I believe Professor Jordan is going to take a leave of absence and he and Jim are going to do some full time research on the device, whatever it is. They both think it has many possibilities. So do I, but I'm going to keep my feet on the ground. If they ever get there!

MATE IN TWO MOVES

By Winston Marks

Illustrated by Ashman

I



Murt's Virus was catastrophically lethal, but it killed in a way no disease had ever thought of—it loved its victims to death!

Love came somewhat late to Dr. Sylvester Murt. In fact, it took the epidemic of 1961 to break down his resistance. A great many people fell in love that year—just about every other person you talked to—so no one thought much about Dr. Murt's particular distress, except a fellow victim who was directly involved in this case.

High Dawn Hospital, where 38-year-old Dr. Murt was resident pathologist, was not the first medical institution to take note of the "plague." The symptoms first came to the attention of the general practitioners, then to the little clinics where the G. P.s sent their patients. But long before anything medical was done about it, the plague was sweeping North and South America and infiltrating every continent and island in the world.

Murt's assistant, Dr. Phyllis Sutton, spotted the first irregularity in the *Times* one morning and mentioned it to him. They were having coffee in Murt's private office-lab, after completing reports on two rush biopsies.

She looked up from the editorial page and remarked, "You know, someone should do a research on the pathology of pantie raids."

Murt spooned sugar into his mug of coffee and stared at her. In their six months' association, it was the first facetious remark she had made in his presence. To this moment, he had held an increasing regard for her quiet efficiency, sobriety, professional dignity and decorum. True, she wore her white coat more tightly belted than was necessary and, likewise, she refused to wear the very low hospital heels that thickened feminine ankles. But she wore a minimum of come-hither in both her cosmetic and personality makeup. This startling remark, then, was most unexpected.

"Pantie raids?" he inquired. "Whatever would justify an inquiry into such a patently behavioristic problem?"

"The epidemic nature and its increasing virulence," she replied soberly. "This spring, the thing has gotten out of hand, according to this editorial. A harmless tradition at a few of the more uninhibited campuses has turned into a national collegiate phenomenon. And now secondary effects are turning up. Instructors say that intramural romance is turning the halls of ivy into amatory rendezvous."

Murt sipped his coffee and said, "Be thankful you aren't a psychiatrist. Bacterial mutations are enough of a problem, without pondering unpredictable emotional disturbances."

His assistant pursued it further. "It says the classrooms are emptying into the marriage bureaus, and graduation exercises this year will be a mockery if something isn't done. What's more, statistics show a startling increase in marriages at the high school level."

Murt shrugged broad shoulders that were slightly bent from long hours over a microscope. "Then be thankful you aren't an overworked obstetrician," he offered as an amendment.

She glanced up from the paper, with annoyance showing in her dark, well-spaced eyes. "Is it of no interest to you that several hundred thousand youngsters are leaving high school and college prematurely because they can't control their glands?"

"Be glad, then," Murt said coldly, "that you aren't an endocrinologist—now drink your coffee. I hear the microtome working. We'll have some business in a minute."

Dr. Phyllis Sutton rustled the pages of the *Times* together, folded it up and threw it at the wastebasket with more vigor than was necessary. The subject was momentarily closed.

His staff position at High Dawn paid less, but the life suited Dr. Murt better than the hectic, though lucrative, private practices of many of his colleagues. He arrived at the hospital early, seven o'clock each day, to be on hand for quick tissue examinations during the morning operations. By ten, the biopsies were usually out of the way, and he spent the rest of the morning and early afternoon checking

material from the bacteriology section and studying post-operative dissections of tumorous tissues and organs removed in surgery.

It was engrossing, important work, and it could be accomplished in a normal work-day, leaving the pathologist considerable leisure to study, read and relax. Shortly after the pantie-raid conversation with Phyllis Sutton, he found the evening paper attracting more than his usual quick perusal.

This emotional fuss in the young human animal was beginning to preoccupy the newspaper world. Writers were raising their eyebrows and a new crop of metaphors at the statistics, which they described variously as alarming, encouraging, disheartening, provocative, distressing, romantic or revolting, depending upon the mood and point of view.

As June, the traditional mating month, wore into July, national statistics were assembled to reveal that marriages were occurring at almost double the highest previous rate, that the trend was accelerating rather than diminishing.

Jewelers and wholesale diamond merchants chalked up fabulous increases in the sale of engagement and wedding settings. Clergymen and qualified public officials were swamped with requests for religious and civil marriage ceremonies.

Parks, beaches and drive-in theaters were jammed with mooning and/or honeymooning couples, and amusement parks began expanding their over-patronized tunnel-of-love facilities.

The boom in houses, furniture, appliances and TV was on, and last year's glut of consumer goods for the home was rapidly turning into a shortage.

All was not good news, however. The divorce courts reported their calendars stacked months ahead of time, and an increasing number of lurid headlines were devoted to the love-triangular troubles of the rich, famous and notorious. Love-nest exposés and bigamous marriages rocketed in number.

The whole world, adolescent and adult, was falling in love, with the inevitable unrequited infatuations, the jealousies, infidelities and the bitter-sweetness of wholesale, illicit, impossible love situations in which vulnerable people found themselves increasing astronomically.

Writers of popular newspaper psychology columns attributed the rampaging emotional fire to everything from mass-hysteria, caused by sunspots, to the paternalism of a government that gave increased income-tax deductions to married people.

Dr. Murt's growing interest was not entirely academic. His bachelorhood was no accident of fate, but rather a carefully contrived independence, for which he paid the price of eternal vigilance. As the

world supply of eligible bachelors diminished sharply, his wariness increased, and he became more and more curt with nurses and female technicians at the hospital.

He revealed the depth of his leeriness one afternoon at the scrub-up sink, where he and his assistant were washing after a messy dissection. Phyllis Sutton remarked, "Holly, down in Personnel, showed me a tabulation she ran off for her own curiosity today, Doctor. Do you realize that in this whole hospital there are only *eight* unmarried female employees?"

Murt threw water droplets from his bare arms and muttered, "Yes, and every one of them's giving me the eye—to say nothing of half the married ones."

His aide dried her long arms and slender hands and looked at him with a crooked smile. "Not to underestimate your good looks, Doctor, but I am one of the unmarried females. I trust I'm not giving you too much trouble?"

He looked up, startled. "Yes—no, *no*—of course not. I'm referring to the nurses and the technicians. What's got into them? The whole lot seems to be on the make!"

Phyllis combed out her short dark hair and looked at him in the mirror. "I assure you the males are just as bad. These interns and four of the male nurses give me a physical with their eyes every time I happen to meet them."

"I suppose this ties in somehow with your pantie-raid theory."

"Well, what do *you* think?"

"I don't think. I just dodge. You'd do well to do the same," Murt told her, putting on his jacket and adjusting his tie.

She sat down in his oak swivel-chair and crossed her slender ankles. "Are you aware of the problem they have downstairs in the out-patient clinic?"

"Hadn't heard," Murt said.

She removed a file from her purse and touched up her short nails. "The outlying clinics are sending their overflow to us. They can't seem to diagnose the odd symptoms they're getting."

"I had noticed the large number of negative test results coming out of the lab," Murt acknowledged. "Haven't followed any of them through, though."

"I have," Phyllis said with a little frown. "Seems to be a psychosomatic nightmare down there."

"What are the symptoms?"

"Mostly neurotic," she said. "Listlessness, loss of appetite, palpitations, cold sweats and absent-mindedness."

"Why don't they go to the psychiatric clinics?"

“Overloaded. They’re sending patients here.”

“What age groups?”

“From puberty to senility. I’d like your permission to do a little special work on blood samples.”

“Another theory?” he asked caustically.

“Yes. Will you give me your permission to test it?”

Murt adjusted his Panama straw in the mirror and noticed that the nostrils of his straight nose were flared for some reason. “Your time is your own after three P. M. every day. If you want to take time out from your thesis research, that’s your business.”

He crossed to the door and was opening it when he became aware that he had had no answer. He looked back at the profile of his assistant’s body, which was now stretched out full length, suspended at three points—her higher-than-practical heels on the linoleum tile, her spine and curved hips using only an inch of the chair’s edge, and her head tilted over the chair’s back. She inhaled from a king-size filter-tip cigarette and blew a feather of smoke at the ceiling.

“*Yuh!*” she said finally. Her flat abdomen jumped at the exhaled syllable, and so did her generous breasts under the soft emerald-green street dress.

“Good *night*!” Murt closed the door behind him quickly and became aware of a sharp stab of what he defined as pure rut—the first he had suffered in fifteen years.

II

He taxied downtown to the athletic club, where he maintained his three-room apartment. The 20-story building was a citadel of masculinity—no females allowed—and recently it was an especial relief to enter the lobby and leave behind the world of turbulently mixed sexes.

The small but lush entry chamber had a deserted air about it this afternoon. At the room desk, Crumbley, the clerk, handed him his key with a pallid hand and returned to sigh over a colored picture in *Esquire*—it was the "fold-out" page, featuring a gorgeous blonde reclining at full length. Crumbley's expression, however, was far from the loose-lipped, lecherous leer that he normally exposed to such art. His eyes had a thin glaze over them, he breathed shallowly and, if Dr. Murt had not known the little man's cynically promiscuous nature so well, he'd have sworn Crumbley was in love.

Upstairs, Murt donned rubber-soled gym shoes and sweat clothes and rode the elevator back down to the gymnasium. Three times a week, he put his muscles through the whole routine-work on the bars, rings, the leather horse, the rope climb and a twenty-lap jog around the balcony racetrack. Afterward, he showered, took a dip in the swimming pool and retired to the health service department for a rubdown and some sunlamp.

Throughout the whole routine, he encountered not a single other member. While Charlie, the husky blond masseur, hammered and kneaded his muscles, Murt reflected on the abating interest in athletics at the club.

"Are we losing members, Charlie?" he asked.

"You'd think so from how dead it is up here," Charlie replied. "But Crumbley says we aren't. The guys just aren't exercising. Can't figure it, Doc. Even with the usual summer slump, it's never been this slow."

When he had absorbed all the punishment he could stand, Murt rolled off, went into the ultraviolet room, set an alarm clock and lay down by himself on one of the paper-covered tables. He adjusted the dark goggles and reflected thankfully that he didn't have to go to the beach for his sun and have sand kicked in his face by a procession of predatory females, ogling his long limbs and trying to attract his attention.

The clean smell of ozone was pleasant, the warmth of the lamps relaxed him, and he dozed off. He dreamed that he heard someone else come in and lie down on the next table and, when he raised his head to see who it was, was amazed to discover his assistant, Dr.

Phyllis Sutton, stretched out like himself, wearing only shower-sandals and goggles.

The alarm clock wakened him from the disturbing dream. He was sweating profusely and took another shower, using the cold water at full needle force to dispel his shock at his subconscious.

Wrapping the robe around him, Murt returned to his apartment to dress for dinner. As he snapped the paper laundry band off a clean shirt, he caught himself wondering how old Phyllis Sutton was. Twenty-eight? Thirty? She appeared younger, but she was in her last year of residence to gain her specialty of pathology. That meant over eleven years of school and practice. She was a lovely creature, but she was no child.

He had half an impulse to phone her for dinner, then became lost in studying his own reaction to the thought. Pulse over a hundred, respiration quickening, irregular. There was a tensing of the abdomen, a faint burning in the pit of his stomach.

He remembered the urge at the office, the dream in the sunroom, the sudden sweat that had required five minutes under the cold needle shower.

After so many years of deliberate, scholarly celibacy, what was happening to him?

He stared at the phone. With six motions of one finger, he could dial Phyllis Sutton's face into view, and suddenly he yearned to do that very ridiculous thing.

After staring at her, off and on, for the six months since she had transferred to High Dawn to complete her residency, now he wanted to see her face outside of working hours for some inexplicable reason.

Call her up, date her, take her dancing, proposition her—get this silly feeling off your chest!

Suppose she was busy or refused to go out with him? Suppose she already had a boy friend?

This last thought deepened the burn in the pit of his stomach, and he finished dressing listlessly. To hell with it! This was poker night. If he did succeed in dating his assistant, they'd inevitably talk shop. That was why he enjoyed a night of cards with his six non-medical brother clubmen, once a week. It was refreshing to break away from the professional point of view.

No, he wouldn't sacrifice that for any woman.

He ate alone, read the paper, joined the poker party at seven o'clock, played six hands of stud, cashed in his chips and returned to his room. In a mood of deep irritation, he found Phyllis Sutton's home phone number and rang it four times with no result.

He thought to try the hospital. She answered from the lab extension on audio only, but her voice and its frankly curious tone sent vertically polarized chills through him.

"I—I wanted to apologize for my rudeness this afternoon," he said with difficulty from a suddenly dry mouth.

There was a brief silence. "Have you been drinking, Dr. Murt?" He noticed that she did not call him Sylvester. Why was he so damned thirsty for some little sign of warmth and friendliness from her?

He cleared his throat. "No, I'm serious. It occurred to me that your interest in the out-clinic problem was commendable, and that I was rather short in my remarks to you."

"Oh! I take it I have your permission to work my project in during the day, then?"

"That's right, so long as it doesn't interfere with the routine." He sounded stuffy to himself, but he was entirely out of practice in speaking to please a female.

"Thanks," she said wryly, and the conversation ended.

Somehow, the brief talk with her restored his perspective. Once again she was his assistant, and the significance of her as a woman faded. She was a dedicated physician like himself. In another few years, she would find a residency of her own. She had no more inclination to knock off and become a woman than he had to squander his time and energy on attaining the status of family man.

It was with mounting admiration that he followed her new project in examining blood samples. As they came up from the clinic, she sorted the specimen tubes at once, putting a tiny snip of yellow Scotch tape under the label of each sample that belonged to a patient with the new undiagnosed disorder.

Then, after the requested hemoglobin, blood sugar and other standard tests had been run, she retrieved the samples from the technicians, grouped them in a special rack and devoted every spare minute to further examination.

She centrifuged, precipitated, filtered and stained over and over, using every qualitative procedure in the book. Murt signed her requisitions for exotic reagents and rare stains. He helped her balance out the large centrifuge to get the maximum r.p.m. from it. He let her use the most costly of the fine-porosity filters.

He had little hope of success, but it was good practice for her. She was required to identify every organism she found, bone up on its known effects, then determine that it could not cause the symptoms reported.

She did all this without impairing her usefulness to Murt. When he needed her, she was at his side, dissecting, taking down notes,

preparing delicate sections and checking slides before they came to him.

In several weeks, she exhausted all known tests on the first samples. After lunch one day, she turned her palms up. "*Nichts da!*" she said, pulling a mashed cigarette from the huge pocket of her white smock.

He glanced at her and swiveled to stare out the window. It was part of his tight campaign to prevent a disastrous recurrence of the emotional tempest he had suffered the day she had begun this research.

"It was a nice brush-up on your bacteriology," he said. "Have you saved the filtrates?"

"Yes, of course. Did I overlook anything?"

"Nothing that we could do here, but there's an electron microscope downtown at Ebert Industrial Labs. How about photomicrography? Could be a filtrable virus."

He knew that she was aware of the possibility, and also that she was reluctant to ask him for additional funds to go into a virus hunt with the expensive piece of equipment.

"Wonderful!" she told him. "I did hate to ask you, but it would be a shame to waste all that immaculate filtrate."

III

A week passed, during which a bulletin from the Government Health Service announced official suspicion that the human race was suffering a mysterious, pandemic affliction which was as yet undiagnosed. Although the symptoms, as reported by hundreds of clinics, were relatively mild, the effect on the nation's economy was growing serious.

Industry and business reported unprecedented absenteeism. Factory supervisors and insurance companies were frantic over the upsurge in accidents. It was estimated that almost fifty per cent of the population exhibited the symptoms of depression, absent-mindedness, insomnia and loss of appetite.

Negligent driving was increasing the highway toll sharply. Educational institutions reported classroom discipline rapidly vanishing. Armed forces headquarters cautiously admitted a new high in desertions and AWOLs.

The consensus among psychiatrists and psychologists was that the condition stemmed from pathogenic causes.

Dr. Murt raised his eyebrows when he read this. Perhaps Phyllis Sutton was right, after all.

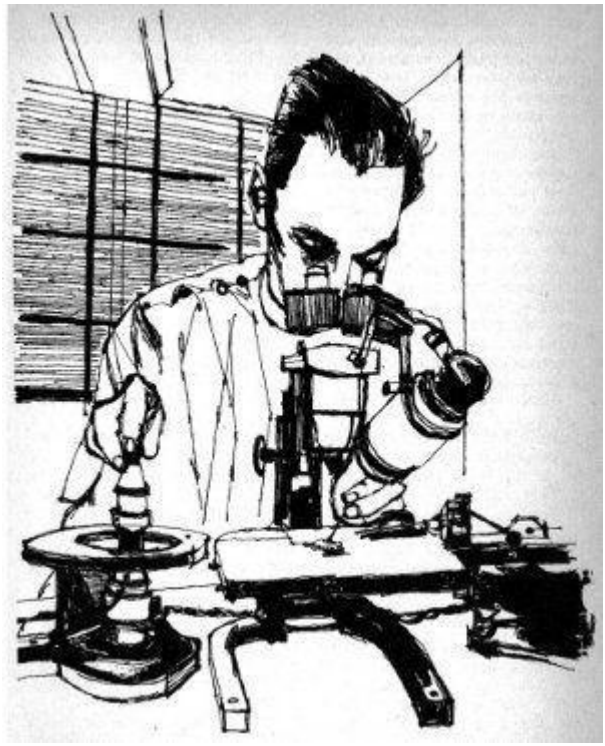
The bulletin continued, "All clinical pathologists are requested to be alert to the presence of any unusual organisms discovered in body fluids or tissues examined. Please report your findings to the U. S. Public Health Service."

Murt found Phyllis Sutton at the microtome, finishing a wax section, and showed her the bulletin.

"Score one for woman's intuition," he smiled. "Federal Health Service tends to agree with your theory."

"Now I *am* eager to see those pictures," she said.

Less than two hours later, a messenger brought the photomicrographs, and the two pathologists bent over them together. Phyllis had submitted eighteen samples, six of which were controls taken from healthy, unafflicted subjects. Per her instructions, smears of the specimens in various degrees of dilution had been photographed through the great electron microscope.



Murt muttered to himself as they compared the controls with the "infected specimens." The "healthy" samples were relatively clear, except for minute protein matter. Conversely, all twelve suspect specimens swarmed with shadowy six-sided dots.

Phyllis' eyes widened. "There is something there! Do you suppose it could be the Love Bug?"

"Love Bug?"

"Certainly. That bulletin didn't go into the psychologists' findings. The diagnosticians downstairs say that the symptoms appear to be no more than complaints of the lovesick."

"Are you back on the pantie-raid theme again?"

"I've never been off it," she replied. "From the first, I've had a notion that some organism was increasing glandular activity. Excess emotionalism often originates in overstimulated glands."

"Of course, but mental attitudes can trigger the glands, and they are interacting. How do you separate the effects? How could you guess that an organism was responsible?"

She shrugged. "It was a possibility within our specialty, so I set out to prove or disprove it. From the appearance of these photographs, I don't think we have *disproved* it."

It was a properly cautious statement that pleased Murt. They were a long way from proving that their newly discovered virus was the culprit, but the research had definitely produced a question mark.

Murt ordered copies of the photomicrographs from Ebert Industrial Labs and arranged for a complete dossier to be forwarded to the U. S. Health Service.

That night, he was startled by a headline and lead story that quoted the government bulletin. The science editor had a field day, tying in speculation that "Doctors Suspect Love Bug Epidemic."

The next day, three reporters called upon him, each with the same query. "It's rumored that you are doing research on the Love Bug, Dr. Murt. Anything to report?"

He shooed them out angrily, after learning that someone at Ebert Labs had given them the tip. Phyllis smiled at him as he slammed the door after the last reporter.

"You still discount the Love Bug idea, don't you?" she asked.

"I dislike sensationalism in a matter like this," he said. "Even if their assumptions were true, I wouldn't like it."

"You can't blame the papers. They're starved for some explanation. I pity your passion for anonymity if your virus proves to be the causative factor."

"*My* virus?"

"Certainly. The whole project is under your auspices and direction."

"See here, Phyl, *you* did the work."

"Don't you dare mention my name," she said. "You're my superior and senior pathologist and it's your duty to protect me against the press. I don't want columnists popping out of my bathroom any more than you do."

Murt gave up. "The argument is entirely anticipatory," he pointed out. "The virus might turn out to be a batch of dormant German measles. Would you consider having dinner with me tonight?"

"Why?" She shot the question back at him like a rebounding tennis ball. "Answer that first!"

Murt opened his mouth. He could not recall ever hearing such a rude rejoinder to an invitation to dinner. Not that there had been a plethora of amenities between them, but this was unthinkable! The question was, why *should* she have dinner with him? Give her eight good reasons. What was his motive in asking her? In one word, *why*?

Murt searched her face, but only a quiet interest showed in her expression.

"Why does any man invite any woman to dinner?" he countered.

"You aren't *any* man, Dr. Murt. Nor am I *any* woman. I want your specific reason for inviting me to dinner. Is it to discuss professional matters or—what?"

"Good Lord, Dr. Sutton!" He followed her lead in using the formal

address. “Man is a social animal! I would enjoy your company at dinner, that’s all. At least, I thought I would.”

She looked at him unrelentingly. “If the talk will be about baseball, books or billiards, I’m for it. If it’s to be moonlight, roses and dimmed lights—no sale.”

It was like asking one’s grandfather for a date. His regard for her highly professional approach turned to resentment. After all, she was a woman, a woman who persisted in belting her smock too tightly and wearing sheer nylons. Why this absurd revulsion at his casual acknowledgment of her sex?

He almost withdrew the invitation, but changed his mind at the last moment. “You name the place and the subject for conversation.”

She nodded. “Very well, I’ll pick you up at seven.”

He had his date—with an emancipated female, and she didn’t let him forget it during the whole meal. The restaurant she picked was expensive, but about as romantic as a bus depot. She ordered beer instead of a cocktail, toyed wordlessly with a $5.00 steak, and argued over the check.

Only as they were preparing to leave did she betray a sign of femininity. A platinum blonde, two tables away, had been eying Murt. Suddenly, she lurched to her feet without a word to her escort, staggered over to the pathologist, slurred, “You’re what I’ve b’n lookin’ for all m’life,” and planted a wet alcoholic kiss on his mouth before he could defend himself.

Her escort peeled her away with sad-eyed apologies. There was no jealousy or anger in his face, only a deep hurt. “She—she isn’t well, I think,” he said. “You know, this new—whatever it is that’s going around.”

Murt wiped off the lipstick and looked at Phyllis, expecting to find at best sardonic amusement, but she seemed pale and annoyed.

“I’m sorry I brought you here,” she said.

“Think nothing of it,” Murt told her. “You heard the man. This is what’s going around. Do you think I’ll catch it?”

Phyllis wasn’t amused. She did let him ride the taxi to her apartment, but bade him a terse goodby at the door.

Except for the incident of the blonde and Phyl’s reaction, the evening had been a bust. Murt wondered how he had ever visualized her as a warm-blooded, responsive female. He smiled at the evening of torment she had once given him.

She was entirely frigid or else so leery of men that she might as well have been one herself.

IV

The following morning, he presided at a specialists' conference at the hospital, during which he revealed the results of the blood research. They had all read the Health Service bulletin and were sharply interested in the photomicrographs.

When the meeting was over, Feldman, the bacteriologist, and Stitchell, an endocrinologist, volunteered to work with Murt. They gave Phyllis' "gland-irritation" theory more credence than Murt. He outlined a program. Both agreed to take the problem back to their own departments.

The conference set Murt behind in his work and he spoke scarcely five words to his assistant until he was ready to leave. As he finished scrubbing up, she handed him an early edition of the *Times*.

"Local Doctor Isolates Love Bug!" The story was sketchy and not half so positive as the headline, but it did name him and High Dawn Hospital, and described the new virus.

He stared at Phyllis Sutton. "Did you—"

"Of course not. The reporters were here, but I sent them away. I told them we were medicine men, not tobacco men."

"Your name isn't even mentioned," he said suspiciously.

"You signed the report to the Health Service," she pointed out. "The leak probably came at that end." She put her hand on his arm. "It wasn't your fault."

His fury cooled as he noted her gesture. Then she realized that he was looking down at her hand and withdrew it quickly.

The next few days were blindly busy. A note from the government acknowledged receipt of his report and pictures, and was followed by a message that the virus could not be identified. The implication was that there was a strong possibility that it was the causative factor in the new *malaise*.

Murt devoted more attention to the joint laboratory work on the virus. The newspapers continued to come up with confidential information they shouldn't have had, and they dubbed the Love Bug, *Murt's Virus*. The name stuck, and the pathologist found himself famous overnight.

Phyllis continued to force all the credit upon him, on threat of transferring out if he violated her confidence. Except for the nuisance of dodging reporters, the accolade was not entirely unpleasant.

His pictures—old ones, Lord knew where they had dug them up—began appearing in the papers. Instead of reproving him, the hospital board voted him a substantial salary increase and gave him a free

hand in directing the research. A government grant was obtained to supplement his budget, and the work picked up speed.

Necessarily, the lead that Phyllis Sutton's early research had given them on the rest of the medical world was maintained largely because of the time lag in disseminating the information contained in Murt's report, and the additional time it took for other clinical laboratories to confirm it.

Cages of experimental animals began arriving along with several additional specialists. Ebert Industrial Labs, contrite over the original information leak, made available their electron microscope, and Murt assigned the new toxicologist to work over there with Feldman, the bacteriologist, studying ways to weaken or destroy the virus.

Stitchell, the endocrinologist, and a trio of psychologists from the State University began injecting monkeys with virus when Feldman found he could propagate it in sterile medium.

On September 12, 1961, Dr. Sylvester Murt became a victim of the virus which bore his name.

He had slept poorly and he awakened feeling empty. His first dismal thought was that Phyl wouldn't be at the hospital this morning. He had told her to spend a few hours down at Ebert Labs, getting notes on their progress.

As he shaved, dressed and breakfasted, this thought preyed on his mind. It wasn't until he had put in half the morning clock-watching and door-gazing that he stepped outside his wretchedness and took an objective look at his feelings.

It wasn't that he missed her help—he had plenty of personnel at his disposal now. He simply longed for the sight of her, for the sound of her voice and her heels clipping busily around his office-lab.

Here we go again, he thought, and then he came up short. The feeling was similar to the silly evening of infatuation he had allowed himself, but it was intensified tenfold. The burn in his stomach was almost painful. He caught himself sighing like a frustrated poet, and he grew to hate the sight of the hall door, through which she kept right on not appearing.

When she failed to show up by 11:30, and he gagged over his lunch, he knew he was sick.

He had Murt's Virus!

Now what? Did knowing you had it make it any easier? Easier to make a damned fool of himself, he supposed. He'd have to take hold of himself or he'd scare her off the grounds.

At the thought of her leaving him for good, something like a dull crosscut saw hacked across his diaphragm, and he dropped his forkful of potato salad.

Back at his office, he diluted 30 cc of pure grain alcohol with water and swallowed it. Some of the distress and anxiety symptoms were relieved, and he bent determinedly to his work.

When her distinctive steps finally came through the door, he refused to raise his head from the binocular microscope. “How are they making out over there?” he mumbled.

“It’s slow,” she said, dropping her notes on his desk. “They’re halfway through the sulfas so far. No results yet.”

Relief at having her near him again was so great, it was almost frightening. But he gained equal pleasure from finding his self-control adequate to keep from raising his head and devouring her with his eyes.

“Sylvester,” her voice came from behind his stool, “if you don’t mind, I’d rather not go over there again.”

“Why not?”

Her voice was strangely soft. “Because I—I missed….”

At that instant, her hand rested on his shoulder and it sent a charge of high voltage through him. He stiffened.

“*Don’t do that!*” he said sharply.

He could see her reflection dimly in the window glass. She took a step backward. “What’s the matter, Sylvester?”

He fought back the confusion in his brain, considered explaining that he was making a fine adjustment on the scope. But he didn’t. He turned and let her have it. “Because I’ve got the virus,” he said in a flat voice. “And the object of my affection—or infected, overstimulated glands—is *you*!”

“Oh, dear! That blonde at the restaurant….” Phyl’s face was pale, but she composed her features quickly. “Do you want me to leave?”

“Lord no! That magnifies the symptoms. Stay with me and—and just be yourself. I won’t bother you. If I lay a finger on you, clobber me.”

“Have you had your blood tested?”

“I don’t have to. I’ve got all the symp—”

He broke off, realizing that he was taking for granted that the new virus *was* the cause of his feeling. Clinically, this was nowhere near proved yet. Slowly he rolled up his sleeve above the elbow. He dipped a swatch of gauze in alcohol and swabbed a vein.

“All right, Phyl, you’re the doctor. Make with the syringe.”

By nightfall, Murt came to understand the reasons for the increase in industrial accidents, absenteeism and the rest of the social effects of the “mild” epidemic. Phyllis Sutton was in his mind constantly. He deliberately did not look at her. But he was aware of her every

movement, the texture and shape of her hand when she handed him a slide, the scent of her powder, the sound of her heels.

When she left the room, he found himself awaiting her return and conjecturing on what she was doing every moment. Not that it was difficult to adjust his behavior—no, that was relatively easy. All he had to do was think about every remark he made to her, censoring word, inflection and tone of voice—and, by keeping his back to her, it was easy to prevent his eyes from darting glances at her profile and staring at the curve of her hip below the tight belt.

By staying busy, he fought off the depression until he left for the club, when it closed in on him like an autumn fog. He stopped at the club bar.

Curly, the bald-headed bartender, eyed him curiously when he ordered a double Scotch.

"Heavy going down at the hospital these days?" Curly asked.

Murt envied him his relaxed, carefree expression. He nodded. "Pretty busy. I suppose you're catching it, too. Lot of people drowning their sorrows these days?"

Curly looked up at the clock. "You said it! In about a half hour, the place'll be loaded. This epidemic is going to run the distilleries dry if it doesn't end pretty soon."

"Does liquor help any?"

"Seems to—a little. It's the damnedest thing! Everybody's in love with the wrong people—I mean ten times as bad as usual. Of course, not everybody. Take my wife—she's got it bad, but she's still in love with *me*. So it could be worse."

"What do you mean?" Murt asked, raising his head.

"I mean it's bad enough for the poor woman to have the guy she wants. It's the jealousy angle. Every minute I'm away, she sits at home wondering if I'm faithful. Calls me up six times a shift. I don't dare take her out anyplace. Every time another female comes in sight, she starts worrying. Kate's a damned good wife, always has been, or I wouldn't be putting up with it. That's what's happening to a lot of marriages. Some guys get fed up and start looking around. About that time, the bug bites *them* and look out, secretary!"

"But it's not her fault," Murt said emphatically.

"I know," Curly shrugged. "A lot of people don't make any allowances for it, though. You know Peter, the elevator boy? He and his wife both got it. For a while it was okay, but I guess they finally drove themselves nuts, keeping tabs on each other. Now they can't stand to be together and they can't stand to be apart. Poor joker ran the cage past the basement limit-switch three times today and had to be bailed out of the shaft. Mr. Johnson said he'd fire him if he could

get another boy."

The implication was shocking to Murt. He had supposed that unhappiness would stem principally from cases of unrequited love, such as his own, but it was apparent that the disease magnified the painful aspects of mutual love as well. Over-possessiveness and jealousy were common reefs of marriage, so it was hardly illogical that the divorce courts were as busy as the marriage license bureaus, after all.

It helped a little to immerse himself in the troubles of others, but, after another double Scotch, he went to his apartment and immediately fell into despondency. The desire to phone Phyllis was almost overpowering, though he knew talking to her wouldn't help. Instead, he dressed and went to dinner. The club boasted a fine chef, but the food tasted like mucilage.

Later, he went to the bar and drank excessively. Yet he had to take a sedative to get to sleep.

He awoke in a stupor at ten o'clock. His phone was jangling persistently. It was Phyllis Sutton, and her face showed sharp concern.

"Are you all right, Sylvester?"

For a moment his hangover dominated, but then it all came back. "Good morning! I'm *great*!" he moaned.

"Stitchell and the new toxicologist think they have something to report," she said.

"So do I. Alcohol is positively not the answer."

"This is important. Your suggestion on the sulfa series seems to have paid off."

"I'll be right over," he said, "as soon as I amputate my head."

"Come down to the zoo. I'll be there."

The thought of a remedy that might relieve him was a fair hangover cure. He dressed quickly and even managed to swallow a little coffee and toast.

V

At the hospital, he went directly to the "zoo" in the basement. A knot of personnel, including Phyllis, Peterson, the toxicologist, and Feldman, opened to admit him to the cage under their inspection. A quick glance at the control cages showed no change in the undoctored monkeys. Males and females were paired off, huddling together miserably, chattering and sadly rubbing their heads together. Each couple eyed the other couples suspiciously. Even here, the overpossessiveness was evident, and Murt cringed from the pitiful, disconsolate expressions.

The cage before him, however, appeared normally animated. The monks were feeding and playing happily. Feldman was grinning. "Had to try a new derivative, Sylvester, but the sulfa series was the right approach."

Murt stared at the cage, redeyed. "Hadn't realized you succeeded in producing the symptoms in monkeys."

Phyllis said, "Why, I gave you that report yester—" She broke off with an understanding glance.

Peterson was exclaiming, "I never saw such a rapid-acting remedy! And so far, there's no evidence of toxic effect."

"It must absorb directly into the gland tissue," Feldman added. "Hardly had time to materially reduce the virus content significantly."

Murt murmured words of congratulations to them, turned on his heel and stalked out. Phyllis followed him to his office.

"Get me some of the stuff and notes on the dosages they administered," he ordered.

"Certainly," she said. "But why didn't you ask—*Dr. Murt, you aren't going to try it on yourself?*"

"Why not?" he barked hoarsely.

"It'll be weeks before we can determine if it's safe," she protested, horrified.

"We haven't got weeks. People are falling apart. This thing's contagious."

Even while Murt said it, he felt it was the wrong approach. He knew his own perspective was shot, but Phyllis would probably try to protect him against himself.

She did not. Instead, her face softened with sympathy and something else he refused to identify. She said, "I'll be right back."

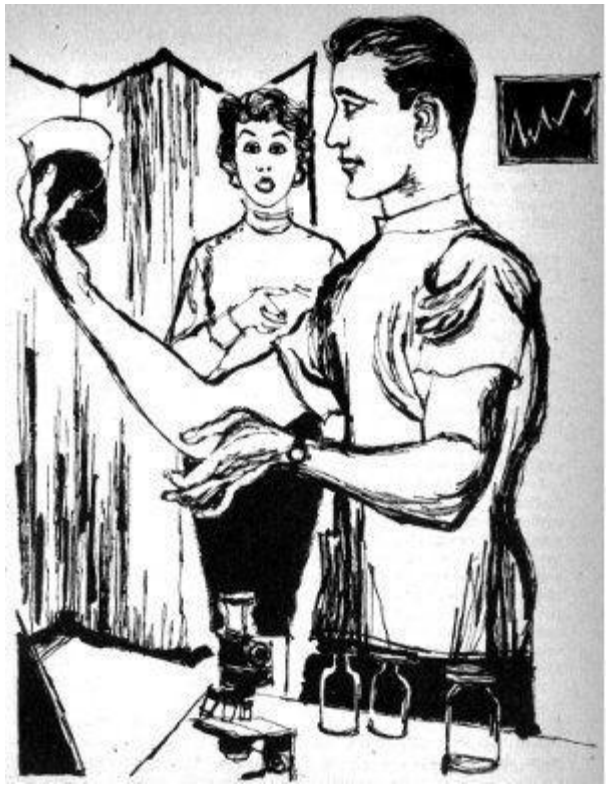
The pressure in his head throbbed down his neck into his body. He wanted her so much, it was difficult to resist following her out into the hall. She returned in a few minutes with a 500-cc glass-stoppered

reagent bottle half full of a milky fluid.

"Oral administration?" he asked.

She nodded. "Fifteen cc for the monkeys."

She secured a small beaker and a tapered graduate from the glassware cabinet and set them before him. He poured 50 cc into the graduated measure and transferred it to the beaker.



"What do they call it?" he asked.

"Sulfa-tetradine," she replied. "One of a series Peterson was testing. There is no physiological data on it yet. All he knows is that it inhibited the virus in culture. So they tried it on the monkeys."

Murt raised the beaker to his lips. It was against every sensible tenet of scientific procedure. He was amazed that Phyllis was silent as he swallowed the bland, chalky fluid. He heard a clink. Turning, he saw her raising the graduate to her lips. In it was a like quantity of sulfa-tetradine.

"What are you doing?" he half-shouted. "We don't need a test-control!"

"I'm not a control," she said softly, touching her lips with a scrap of gauze. "I've had the virus for months."

He stared at her unbelievingly. "How do you know?"

"One of the first test samples was my own blood," she said. "You saw it. It was one of the twelve positive."

"But the symptoms—you don't show a sign of—"

"Thanks," she said. "I started to break down yesterday, but you didn't notice. You see, you are my fixation and when you told me that you had it, too, I—"

"*Your* fixation!" The beaker slipped from his fingers and smashed to the tile. "*You're in love with me?*"

Her arms hung loosely at her sides and tears rimmed her eyes. "Pathologically or otherwise, I've been a case since before I started the blood tests."

They moved together and clung to each other. "Phyl, Phyl—why didn't you tell me?"

Fiercely, she closed his lips with her own, and her fingers dug deeply into his shoulders. His arms pulled her closer yet, trying to fill the void in him that was greater than the Universe. For a long minute, the knowledge of her love and physical contact with her straining body dispelled the bleak loneliness.

When their lips parted, they gasped for breath.

It was no good. It was like tearing at an itching insect bite with your fingernails. The relief was only momentary, and it left the wound bleeding and more irritated than ever. Even if they were married—look at Peter at the club—Peter and his wife, mutually in love and completely miserable. It wasn't normal love. It was the damned virus!

As well argue with gravity. He tried to tell her, but he couldn't make her understand. Her restraint had been magnificent, but when the dam broke, it was beyond stopping the flood of her emotion. And now he couldn't believe it himself. Nothing this wonderful could be destroyed by mere misunderstanding. He cursed the years of his celibacy. All that time wasted—lost!

It was six o'clock before they reached her apartment. The License Bureau had been a mob scene. Hours more, upstairs in the City Hall waiting for the judge, while they held hands like a pair of college sophomores, staring into each others' eyes, drinking, drinking the elixir of adoration with a thirst that wouldn't be sated.

Phyllis weakened first. In the cab, after the ceremony, she released his hand and wiped her damp forehead.

Then, in the elevator, Murt felt himself relaxing. The alchemy of sustained passion had exhausted them both, he decided.

As Phyllis slipped the key in the door, she looked up at him in surprise. "Do you know, I'm hungry. I'm starved—for the first time in months."

Murt discovered his own stomach was stirring with a prosaic pangful demand of its own. "We should have stopped to eat," he said, realizing they had forgotten lunch.

"*Steaks!* I have some beauties in my freezer!" Phyllis exclaimed. They peeled off their coats and she led him into the small kitchen. She pointed at the cupboard and silverware drawer. "Set the table. We'll eat in five minutes."

Slipping into an apron, she explored the freezer for meat and French fries, dropped them into the HF cooker and set the timer for 90 seconds. When it clicked off, she was emptying a transparent sack of prepared salad into a bowl.

"Coffee will be ready in 50 seconds, so let's eat," she announced.

For minutes, they ate silently, ravenously, face to face in the little breakfast nook. Murt had forgotten the pure animal pleasure of satisfying a neglected appetite, and so, apparently, had his wife.

Wife! The thought jolted him.

Their eyes met, and he knew that the same thing was in her mind.

The sulfa-tetradine!

With the edge barely off his hunger, he stopped eating. She did, too. They sipped the steaming coffee and looked at each other.

"I—feel better," Phyllis said at last.

"So do I."

"I mean—I feel differently."

He studied her face. It was new. The tenseness was gone and it was a beautiful face, with soft lips and intelligent eyes. But now the eyes were merely friendly.

And it aroused no more than a casual pleasure in him, the pleasure of viewing a lovely painting or a perfect sunset. A peaceful intellectual rapport settled over them, inducing a physical lethargy. They spoke freely of their sensations, of the hypo-adrenal effects, and wondered that there was no unpleasant reaction. They decided that, initially at least, sulfa-tetradine was a miraculous success. Murt thought he should go back to the hospital and work out a report right away.

Phyllis agreed and offered to accompany him, but he said she had better get a night's sleep. The next day would be hectic.

After four hours at his desk, he called a taxi and, without hesitation, gave the address of his club. Not until he fell wearily into bed did he remember it was his wedding night.

By mutual agreement, the marriage was annulled the next day.

Feldman and Peterson were gratified at the efficacy of their drug, but both were horrified that Murt had chosen to experiment on himself. As usual, Phyl had insisted on being left out of the report.

After a week of close observation, one of the monkeys was chloroformed and tissue-by-tissue examination was made by an army

of histologists. Blood samples showed completely clear of the virus, as did a recheck on Murt's own blood. No deleterious effects could be detected, so the results were published through the Government Health Service.

It was the day before Christmas before Dr. Sylvester Murt first noticed the approaching symptoms of a relapse, or reinfection—he couldn't guess which. The past weeks had been pleasantly busy and, as acclaimed authority on Murt's virus, he had had little time to think subjectively about his experience.

Sulfa-tetradine was now considered the specific for the affliction and was being produced and shipped by the carload all over the world. The press had over-generously insisted on giving him all the credit for the remedy as well as the isolation of the disease virus. He was an international hero.

The warning of another attack came to him at 3:30 in the afternoon, when Phyllis Sutton was leaving. She stuck her head back in the door and gave him an uncommonly warm smile and cried, "Merry Christmas, Doctor!"

He waved at her and, as the door closed, caught his breath. There was the burn in his stomach again. It passed away and he refused to give it further thought.

His own cab wound its way through the heavy Christmas Eve traffic an hour before store-closing time. Finally, the vehicle stalled in a jam. It was only six blocks to his club, so Murt paid off the driver and walked.

Part of his strategy of bachelorhood had been to ignore Christmas and the other sentimental seasons, when loneliness costs many a man his independence. But now it was impossible to ignore the snowflakes, the bustling, package-laden crowds and the street-corner Santa Clauses with their tinkling bells.

He found himself staring into department store windows at the gay decorations.

A pair of shimmering, nearly invisible nylons caught his eye. They were the most impalpable of substances, only their bare outline visible against the white background.

He thought of Phyllis and, on impulse, went into the store and bought a pair. The clerk had to pick a size at random for him. Outside, on the sidewalk, he stared at the prettily gift-wrapped package and finally acknowledged the tremor, the tension and the old ache in the region of his diaphragm.

Relapse!

He plodded three slushy blocks up a side-street before he found a cab. He gave Phyllis Sutton's address to the driver and sank back in

the taxi as a wave of weakness overcame him. What if she weren't home? It was Christmas Eve. She would probably be visiting friends or relatives.

But she wasn't. She opened the door under his impatient knock, and her eyes widened cordially.

"Sylvester!" she exclaimed. "Merry Christmas! Is that for me?" She pointed to the package, clutched forgotten in his hands.

"Merry, hell!" he said dispiritedly. "I came to warn you to look out for a relapse. Mine's been coming on all day."

She drew him inside, made him take off his coat and sit down before she acknowledged his remark. The apartment was cozy, with a tiny Christmas tree decorated in the window. She returned from the hall closet and sat beside him.

"Look what I did—on impulse," he said and tossed the package on her lap. "That's what really turned it on."

She opened the nylons and looked up at him sideways.

He continued unhappily, "I saw them in a window. Made me think of you, and about that time the seizure began. I tried to kid myself that I was just getting you a little token of—of my esteem, but the symptoms are almost as bad as before already."

Apparently she refused to accept the seriousness of the situation. Her smile was fatuous, he thought, kissably fatuous.

"Don't you realize what this means?" he demanded. "Peterson and Feldman turned up a very distressing fact. Sulfa-tetradine deposits out in the endocrines, so a single dose is all a person can take. This relapse of mine means we have it all to do over again."

"Think, Dr. Murt! Just think a minute," she urged.

"About what?"

"If the sulfa deposits out in the very glands it's there to protect, how could you be suffering another attack?"

His arms ached to reach out and emphasize his argument. "I don't know. All I know is how I feel. In a way, this is even worse, because —"

"I know," Phyllis said and perversely moved close to him. "My relapse came last Tuesday when I bought you a tie for Christmas. I sent a blood sample over to Ebert Labs right away. And do you know what?"

"What?" Murt asked in a bewildered fog.

"It was negative. I don't have Murt's Virus." She slipped an arm around his waist and put her head on his shoulder. "All I've got is Murt himself."

THE UNLEARNED
By Raymond F. Jones

The scientists of Rykeman III were conceded by all the galactic members to be supreme in scientific achievement. Now the Rykes were going to share their vast knowledge with the scientists of Earth. To any question they would supply an answer—for a price. And Hockley, of all Earth's scientists, was the stubborn one who wanted to weigh the answers with the costs….

The Chief Officer of Scientific Services, Information and Coordination was a somewhat misleading and obscure title, and Dr. Sherman Hockley who held it was not the least of those whom the title misled and sometimes obscured.

He told himself he was not a mere library administrator, although he was proud of the information files built up under his direction. They contained the essence of accumulated knowledge found to date on Earth and the extraterrestrial planets so far contacted. He didn't feel justified in claiming to be strictly a research supervisor, either, in spite of duties as top level administrator for all divisions of the National Standardization and Research Laboratories and their subsidiaries in government, industry, and education. During his term of supervision the National Laboratories had made a tremendous growth, in contrast to a previous decline.

Most of all, however, he disclaimed being a figurehead, to which all the loose strings of a vast and rambling organization could be tied. But sometimes it was quite difficult to know whether or not that was his primary assignment after all. His unrelenting efforts to keep out of the category seemed to be encountering more and more determination to push him in that direction.

Of course, this was merely the way it looked in his more bitter moments—such as the present. Normally, he had a full awareness of the paramount importance of his position, and was determined to administer it on a scale in keeping with that importance. His decision could affect the research in the world's major laboratories. Not that he was a dictator by any means, although there were times when dictation was called for. As when a dozen projects needed money and the Congress allotted enough for one or two. Somebody had to make a choice—

His major difficulty was that active researchers knew it was the Congressional Science Committee which was ultimately responsible for their bread and butter. And the Senators regarded the scientists,

who did the actual work in the laboratories, as the only ones who mattered. Both groups tended to look upon Hockley's office as a sort of fulcrum in their efforts to maintain balance with each other—or as referee in their sparring for adequate control over each other.

At that, however, things research-wise were better than ever before. More funds and facilities were available. Positions in pure research were more secure.

And then, once again, rumors about Rykeman III had begun to circulate wildly a few days ago.

Since Man's achievement of extra-galactic flight, stories of Rykeman III had tantalized the world and made research scientists sick with longing when they considered the possible truth of what they heard. The planet was rumored to be a world of super-science, whose people had an answer for every research problem a man could conceive. The very few Earthmen who had been to Rykeman III confirmed the rumors. It was a paradise, according to their stories. And among other peoples of the galaxies the inhabitants of Rykeman III were acknowledged supreme in scientific achievement. None challenged them. None even approached them in abilities.

What made the situation so frustrating to Earthmen was the additional report that the Rykes were quite altruistically sharing their science with a considerable number of other worlds on a fee basis. Earth scientists became intoxicated at the mere thought of studying at the feet of the exalted Rykes.

Except Dr. Sherman Hockley. From the first he had taken a dim view of the Ryke reports. Considering the accomplishments of the National Laboratories, he could see no reason for his colleagues' half-shameful disowning of all their own work in favor of a completely unknown culture several hundred million light years away. They were bound to contact more advanced cultures in their explorations—and could be thankful they were as altruistic as the Rykes!—but it was no reason to view themselves as idiot children hoping to be taught by the Rykes.

He had kept his opinions very much to himself in the past, since they were not popular with his associates, who generally regarded his attitudes as simply old-fashioned. But now, for the first time, a Ryke ship was honoring Earth with a visit. There was almost hysterical speculation over the possibility that Earth would be offered tutelage by the mighty Ryke scientists. Hockley wouldn't have said he was unalterably opposed to the idea. He would have described himself as extremely cautious. What he did oppose wholeheartedly was the enthusiasm that painted the Rykes with pure and shining light, without a shadowy hue in the whole picture.

Since his arrival, the Ryke envoy had been closeted with members

of the Congressional Science Committee. Not a word had leaked as to his message. Shortly, however, the scientists were to be let in on the secret which might affect their careers for better or for worse during the rest of their lives, and for many generations to come. The meeting was going to be—

Hockley jumped to his feet as he glanced at the clock. He hurried through the door to the office of his secretary, Miss Cardston, who looked meaningfully at him as he passed.

"I'll bet there isn't a Senator on time," he said.

In the corridor he almost collided with Dr. Lester Showalter, who was his Administrative Assistant for Basic Research. "The Ryke character showed up fifteen minutes ago," said Showalter. "Everyone's waiting."

"We've got six minutes yet," said Hockley. He walked rapidly beside Showalter. "Is there any word on what the envoy's got that's so important?"

"No. I've got the feeling it's something pretty big. Wheeler and Johnson of Budget are there. Somebody said it might have something to do with the National Lab."

"I don't see the connection between that and a meeting with the Ryke," said Hockley.

Showalter stopped at the door of the conference room. "Maybe they want to sell us something. At any rate, we're about to find out."

The conference table was surrounded by Senators of the Committee. Layered behind them were scientists representing the cream of Hockley's organization. Senator Markham, the bulky, red-faced Chairman greeted them. "Your seats are reserved at the head of the table," he said.

"Sorry about the time," Hockley mumbled. "Clock must be slow."

"Quite all right. We assembled just a trifle early. I want you to meet our visitor, Special Envoy from Rykeman III, Liacan."

Markham introduced them, and the stick-thin envoy arose with an extended hand. His frail, whistling voice that was in keeping with his bird-like character spoke in clear tones. "I am happy to know you, Dr. Hockley, Dr. Showalter."

The two men sat down in good view of the visitor's profile. Hockley had seen the Rykes before, but had always been repelled by their snobbish approach. Characteristically, the envoy bore roughly anthropomorphic features, including a short feather covering on his dorsal side. He was dressed in bright clothing that left visible the streak of feathering that descended from the bright, plumed crown and along the back of his neck. Gravity and air pressure of Earth were about normal for him. For breathing, however, he was required to wear a small device in one narrow nostril. This was connected to a

compact tank on his shoulder.

Markham called for order and introduced the visitor. There was a round of applause. Liacan bowed with a short, stiff gesture and let his small black eyes dart over the audience. With an adjustment of his breathing piece he began speaking.

"It is recognized on Earth," he said, "as it is elsewhere, that my people of Rykeman III possess undisputed intellectual leadership in the galaxies of the Council. Your research is concerned with things taught only in the kindergartens of my world. Much that you hold to be true is in error, and your most profound discoveries are self-evident to the children of my people."

Hockley felt a quick, painful contraction in the region of his diaphragm. So this was it!

"We are regarded with much jealousy, envy, and even hatred by some of our unlearned neighbors in space," said the Ryke. "But it has never been our desire to be selfish with our superior achievements which make us the object of these feelings. We have undertaken a program of scientific leadership in our interstellar neighborhood. This began long before you came into space and many worlds have accepted the plan we offer.

"Obviously, it is impractical to pour out all the knowledge and basic science we have accumulated. Another world would find it impossible to sort out that which was applicable to it. What we do is act as a consultation center upon which others can call at will to obtain data pertaining to any problem at hand. Thus, they are not required to sort through wholly inapplicable information to find what they need.

"For example, if you desire to improve your surface conveyances, we will supply you with data for building an optimum vehicle suitable for conditions on Earth and which is virtually indestructible. You will of course do your own manufacturing, but even there we can supply you with technology that will make the process seem miraculous by your present standards.

"Our services are offered for a fee, payable in suitable items of goods or raw materials. When you contemplate the freedom from monotonous and unending research in fields already explored by us, I am certain you will not consider our fees exorbitant. Our desire is to raise the cultural level of all peoples to the maximum of which they are capable. We know it is not possible or even desirable to bring others to our own high levels, but we do offer assistance to all cultures in accord with their ability to receive. The basic principle is that they shall ask—and whatever is asked for, with intelligence sufficient for its utilization, that shall be granted.

"I am certain I may count on your acceptance of the generous

offer of my people."

The envoy sat down with a jiggling of his bright plume, and there was absolute silence in the room. Hockley pictured to himself the dusty, cobweb laboratories of Earth vacated by scientists who ran to the phone to call the Rykes for answers to every problem.

Senator Markham stood up and glanced over the audience. "There is the essence of the program which has been submitted to us," he said. "There is a vast amount of detail which is, of course, obvious to the minds of our friends on Rykeman III, but which must be the subject of much deliberation on the part of us comparatively simple minded Earthmen." He gave a self-conscious chuckle, which got no response.

Hockley felt mentally stunned. Here at last was the thing that had been hoped for by most, anxiously awaited by a few, and opposed by almost no one.

"The major difficulty," said Markham with slow dignity, "is the price. It's high, yes. In monetary terms, approximately twelve and a half billions per year. But certainly no man in his right mind would consider any reasonable figure too high for what we can expect to receive from our friends of Rykeman III.

"We of the Science Committee do not believe, however, that we could get a commitment for this sum to be added to our normal budget. Yet there is a rather obvious solution. The sum required is very close to that which is now expended on the National Standardization and Research Laboratories."

Hockley felt a sudden chill at the back of his neck.

"With the assistance of the Rykes," said Markham, "we shall have no further need of the National Laboratories. We shall require but a small staff to analyze our problems and present them to the Rykes and relay the answers for proper assimilation. Acceptance of the Ryke program provides its own automatic financing!"

He glanced about with a triumphant smile. Hockley felt as if he were looking through a mist upon something that happened a long time ago. The National Lab! Abandon the National Lab!

Around him there were small nods of agreement from his colleagues. Some pursed their lips as if doubtful—but not very much. He waited for someone to rise to his feet in a blast of protest. No one did. For a moment Hockley's own hands tensed on the back of the chair in front of him. Then he slumped back to his seat. Now was not the time.

They had to thrash it out among themselves. He had to show them the magnitude of this bribe. He had to find an argument to beat down the Congressmen's irrational hopes of paradise. He couldn't plead for the Lab on the grounds of sentiment—or that it was

sometimes a good idea to work out your own problems. The Senators didn't care for the problems or concerns of the scientists. It appeared that even the scientists themselves had forgotten to care. He had to slug both groups with something very solid.

Markham was going on. "We are convinced this is a bargain which even the most obstinate of our Congressional colleagues will be quick to recognize. It would be folly to compute with building blocks when we can gain access to giant calculators. There should be no real difficulty in getting funds transferred from the National Laboratory.

"At this time we will adjourn. Liacan leaves this evening. Our acceptance of this generous offer will be conveyed to Rykeman III directly upon official sanction by the Congress. I wish to ask this same group to meet again for discussion of the details incident to this transfer of operations. Let us say at ten o'clock in the morning, gentlemen."

Hockley said goodbye to the envoy. Afterwards, he moved through the circle of Senators to his own group. In the corridor they tightened about him and followed along as if he had given an order for them to follow him. He turned and attempted a grin.

"Looks like a bull session is in order, gents. Assembly in five minutes in my office."

As he and Showalter opened the door to Miss Cardston's office and strode in, the secretary looked up with a start. "I thought you were going to meet in the conference room."

"We've met," said Hockley. "This is the aftermeeting. Send out for a couple of cases of beer." He glanced at the number surging through the doorway and fished in his billfold. "Better make it three. This ought to cover it."

With disapproval, Miss Cardston picked up the bills and turned to the phone. Almost simultaneously there was a bellow of protest and an enormous, ham-like hand gripped her slender wrist. She glanced up in momentary fright.

Dr. Forman K. Silvers was holding her wrist with one hand and clapping Hockley on the back with the other. "This is not an occasion for beer, my boy!" he said in an enormous voice. "Make that a case of champagne, Miss Cardston." He released her and drew out his own billfold.

"Get somebody to bring in a couple of dozen chairs," Hockley said.

In his own office he walked to the window behind his desk and stood facing it. The afternoon haze was coming up out of the ocean. Faintly visible were the great buildings of the National Laboratories on the other side of the city. Above the mist the sun caught the tip of

the eight story tower where the massive field tunnels of the newly designed gammatron were to be installed.

Or *were* to have been installed.

The gammatron was expected to make possible the creation of gravitational fields up to five thousand g's. It would probably be a mere toy to the Rykes, but Hockley felt a fierce pride in its creation. Maybe that was childish. Maybe his whole feeling about the Lab was childish. Perhaps the time had come to give up childish things and take upon themselves adulthood.

But looking across the city at the concrete spire of the gammatron, he didn't believe it.

He heard the clank of metal chairs as a couple of clerks began bringing them in. Then there was the clink of glassware. He turned to see Miss Cardston stiffly indicating a spot on the library table for the glasses and the frosty bottles.

Hockley walked slowly to the table and filled one of the glasses. He raised it slowly. "It's been a short life but a merry one, gentlemen." He swallowed the contents of the glass too quickly and returned to his desk.

"You don't sound very happy about the whole thing," said Mortenson, a chemist who wore a neat, silvery mustache.

"Are you overjoyed," said Hockley, "that we are to swap the National Lab for a bottomless encyclopedia?"

"Yes, I think so," said Mortenson. "There are some minor objections, but in the end I'm certain we'll all be satisfied with what we get."

"Satisfied! Happy!" exclaimed the mathematician, Dr. Silvers. "How can you use words so prosaic and restrained in references to these great events which we shall be privileged to witness in our lifetimes?"

He had taken his stand by the library table and was now filling the glasses with the clear, bubbling champagne, sloshing it with ecstatic abandon over the table and the rug.

Hockley glanced toward him. "You don't believe, then, Dr. Silvers, that we should maintain any reserve in regard to the Rykes?"

"None whatever! The gods themselves have stepped down and offered an invitation direct to paradise. Should we question or hold back, or say we are merely happy. The proper response of a man about to enter heaven is beyond words!"

The bombast of the mathematician never failed to enliven any backroom session in which he participated. "I have no doubt," he said, "that within a fortnight we shall be in possession of a solution to the Legrandian Equations. I have sought this for forty years."

"I think it would be a mistake to support the closing of the

National Laboratories," said Hockley slowly.

As if a switch had been thrown, their expressions changed. There was a sudden carefulness in their stance and movements, as if they were feinting before a deadly opponent.

"I don't feel it's such a bad bargain," said a thin, bespectacled physicist named Judson. He was seated across the room from Hockley. "I'll vote to sacrifice the Lab in exchange for what the Rykes will give us."

"That's the point," said Hockley. "Exactly what are the Rykes going to give us? And we speak very glibly of sharing their science. But shall we actually be in any position to share it? What becomes of the class of scientists on Earth when the Lab is abandoned?"

Wilkins stood abruptly, his hands shoved part way into his pockets and his lower jaw extended tensely. "I don't believe that's part of this question," he said. "It is not just we scientists who are to share the benefits of the Rykes. It is Mankind. At this time we have no right to consider mere personal concerns. We would betray our whole calling—our very humanity—if we thought for one moment of standing in the way of this development because of our personal concern over economic and professional problems. There has never been a time when a true scientist would not put aside his personal concerns for the good of all."

Hockley waited, half expecting somebody to start clapping. No one did, but there were glances of self-righteous approval in Wilkins' direction. The biologist straightened the sleeves of his coat with a smug gesture and awaited Hockley's rebuttal.

"*We* are Mankind," Hockley said finally. "You and I are as much a part of humanity as that bus load of punch machine clerks and store managers passing on the street outside. If we betray ourselves we have betrayed humanity.

"This is not a sudden thing. It is the end point of a trend which has gone on for a long time. It began with our first contacts beyond the galaxy, when we realized there were peoples far in advance of us in science and economy. We have been feeding on them ever since. Our own developments have shrunk in direct proportion. For a long time we've been on the verge of becoming intellectual parasites in the Universe. Acceptance of the Ryke offer will be the final step in that direction."

Instantly, almost every other man in the room was talking at once. Hockley smiled faintly until the angry voices subsided. Then Silvers cleared his throat gently. He placed his glass beside the bottles on the table with a precise motion. "I am sure," he said, "that a moment's thought will convince you that you do not mean what you have just said.

“Consider the position of pupil and teacher. One of Man’s greatest failings is his predilection for assuming always the position of teacher and eschewing that of pupil. There is also the question of humility, intellectual humility. We scientists have always boasted of our readiness to set aside one so-called truth and accept another with more valid supporting evidence.

“Since our first contact with other galactic civilizations we have had the utmost need to adopt an attitude of humility. We have been fortunate in coming to a community of worlds where war and oppression are not standard rules of procedure. Among our own people we have encountered no such magnanimity as has been extended repeatedly by other worlds, climaxed now by the Ryke’s magnificent offer.

“To adopt sincere intellectual humility and the attitude of the pupil is not to function as a parasite, Dr. Hockley.”

“Your analogy of teacher and pupil is very faulty in expressing our relation to the Rykes,” said Hockley. “Or perhaps I should say it is too hellishly accurate. Would you have us remain the eternal pupils? The closing of the National Laboratories means an irreversible change in our position. Is it worth gaining a universe of knowledge to give up your own personal free inquiry?”

“I am sure none of us considers he is giving up his personal free inquiry,” said Silvers almost angrily. “We see unlimited expansion beyond anything we have imagined in our wildest dreams.”

On a few faces there were frowns of uncertainty, but no one spoke up to support him. Hockley knew that until this vision of paradise wore off there were none of them on whom he could count.

He smiled broadly and stood up to ease the tension in the room. “Well, it appears you have made your decision. Of course, Congress can accept the Ryke plan whether we approve or not, but it is good to go on record one way or the other. I suppose that on the way out tonight it would be proper to check in at Personnel and file a services available notification.”

And then he wished he hadn’t said that. Their faces grew a little more set at his unappreciated attempt at humor.

Showalter remained after the others left. He sat across the desk while Hockley turned back to the window. Only the tip of the gammatron tower now caught the late afternoon sunlight.

“Maybe I’m getting old,” Hockley said. “Maybe they’re right and the Lab isn’t worth preserving if it means the difference between getting or not getting tutelage from the Rykes.”

“But you don’t feel that’s true,” said Showalter.

“No.”

"You're the one who built the Lab into what it is. It has as much worth as it ever had, and you have an obligation to keep it from being destroyed by a group of politicians who could never understand its necessity."

"I didn't build it," said Hockley. "It grew because I was able to find enough people who wanted the institution to exist. But I've been away from research so long—I never was much good at it really. Did you ever know that? I've always thought of myself as a sort of impressario of scientific productions, if I might use such a term. Maybe those closer to the actual work are right. Maybe I'm just trying to hang on to the past. It could be time for a jump to a new kind of progress."

"You don't believe any of that."

Hockley looked steadily in the direction of the Lab buildings. "I don't believe any of it. That isn't just an accumulation of buildings over there, with a name attached to them. It's the advancing terminal of all Man's history of trying to find out about himself and the Universe. It started before Neanderthal climbed into his caves a half million years ago. From then until now there's a steady path of trial and error—of learning. There's exultation and despair, success and failure. Now they want to say it was all for nothing."

"But to be pupils—to let the Rykes teach us—"

"The only trouble with Silvers' argument is that our culture has never understood that teaching, in the accepted sense, is an impossibility. There can be only learning—never teaching. The teacher has to be eliminated from the actual learning process before genuine learning can ever take place. But the Rykes offer to become the Ultimate Teacher."

"And if this is true," said Showalter slowly, "you couldn't teach it to those who disagree, could you? They'd have to learn it for themselves."

Hockley turned. For a moment he continued to stare at his assistant. Then his face broke into a narrow grin. "Of course you're right! There's only one way they'll ever learn it: go through the actual experience of what Ryke tutelage will mean."

Most of the workrooms at Information Central were empty this time of evening. Hockley selected the first one he came to and called for every scrap of data pertaining to Rykeman III. There was a fair amount of information available on the physical characteristics of the world. Hockley scribbled swift, privately intelligible notes as he scanned. The Rykes lived under a gravity one third heavier than Earth's, with a day little more than half as long, and they received only forty percent as much heat from their frail sun as Earthmen were accustomed to.

Cultural characteristics included a trading system that made the entire planet a single economic unit. And the planet had no history whatever of war. The Rykes themselves had contributed almost nothing to the central libraries of the galaxies concerning their own personal makeup and mental functions, however. What little was available came from observers not of their race.

There were indications they were a highly unemotional race, not given to any artistic expression. Hockley found this surprising. The general rule was for highly intellectual attainments to be accompanied by equally high artistic expression.

But all of this provided no data that he could relate to his present problem, no basis for argument beyond what he already had. He returned the films to their silver cans and sat staring at the neat pile of them on the desk. Then he smiled at his own obtuseness. Data on Rykeman III might be lacking, but the Ryke plan had been tried on plenty of other worlds. Data on *them* should not be so scarce.

He returned the cans and punched out a new request on the call panel. Twenty seconds later he was pleasantly surprised by a score of new tapes in the hopper. That was enough for a full night's work. He wished he'd brought Showalter along to help.

Then his eye caught sight of the label on the topmost can in the pile: Janisson VIII. The name rang a familiar signal somewhere deep in his mind. Then he knew—that was the home world of Waldon Thar, one of his closest friends in the year when he'd gone to school at Galactic Center for advanced study.

Thar had been one of the most brilliant researchers Hockley had ever known. In bull session debate he was instantly beyond the depth of everyone else.

Janisson VIII. Thar could tell him about the Rykes!

Hockley pushed the tape cans aside and went to the phone in the workroom. He dialed for the interstellar operator. "Government priority call to Janisson VIII," he said. "Waldon Thar. He attended Galactic Center Research Institute twenty-three years ago. He came from the city Plar, which was his home at that time. I have no other information, except that he is probably employed as a research scientist."

There was a moment's silence while the operator noted the information. "There will be some delay," she said finally. "At present the inter-galactic beams are full."

"I can use top emergency priority on this," said Hockley. "Can you clear a trunk for me on that?"

"Yes. One moment, please."

He sat by the window for half an hour, turning down the light in the workroom so that he could see the flow of traffic at the port west

of the Lab buildings. Two spaceships took off and three came in while he waited. And then the phone rang.

"I'm sorry," the operator said. "Waldon Thar is reported not on Janisson VIII. He went to Rykeman III about two Earth years ago. Do you wish to attempt to locate him there?"

"By all means," said Hockley. "Same priority."

This was better than he had hoped for. Thar could really get him the information he needed on the Rykes. Twenty minutes later the phone rang again. In the operator's first words Hockley sensed apology and knew the attempt had failed.

"Our office has learned that Waldon Thar is at present on tour as aide to the Ryke emissary, Liacan. We can perhaps trace—"

"No!" Hockley shouted. "That won't be necessary. I know now—"

He almost laughed aloud to himself. This was an incredible piece of good luck. Waldon Thar was probably out at the space port right now—unless one of those ships taking off had been the Ryke—

He wondered why Thar had not tried to contact him. Of course, it had been a long time, but they had been very close at the center. He dialed the field control tower. "I want to know if the ship from Rykeman III has departed yet," he said.

"They were scheduled for six hours ago, but mechanical difficulty has delayed them. Present estimated take-off is 1100."

Almost two hours to go, Hockley thought. That should be time enough. "Please put me in communication with one of the aides aboard named Waldon Thar. This is Sherman Hockley of Scientific Services. Priority request."

"I'll try, sir." The tower operator manifested a sudden increase of respect. "One moment, please."

Hockley heard the buzz and switch clicks of communication circuits reaching for the ship. Then, in a moment, he heard the somewhat irritated but familiar voice of his old friend.

"Waldon Thar speaking," the voice said. "Who wishes to talk?"

"Listen, you old son of a cyclotron's maiden aunt!" said Hockley. "Who would want to talk on Sol III? Why didn't you give me a buzz when you landed? I just found out you were here."

"Sherm Hockley, of course," the voice said with distant, unperturbed tones. "This is indeed a surprise and a pleasure. To be honest, I had forgotten Earth was your home planet."

"I'll try to think of something to jog your memory next time. How about getting together?"

"Well—I don't have very long," said Thar hesitantly. "If you could come over for a few minutes—"

Hockley had the jolting feeling that Waldon Thar would just as soon pass up the opportunity for their meeting. Some of the

enthusiasm went out of his voice. “There’s a good all-night interplanetary eatery and bar on the field there. I’ll be along in fifteen minutes.”

“Fine,” said Thar, “but please try not to be late.”

On the way to the field, Hockley wondered about the change that had apparently taken place in Thar. Of course, *he* had changed, too—perhaps for much the worse. But Thar sounded like a stuffed shirt now, and that is the last thing Hockley would have expected. In school, Thar had been the most irreverent of the whole class of irreverents, denouncing in ecstasy the established and unproven lore, riding the professors of unsubstantiated hypotheses. Now—well, he didn’t sound like the Thar Hockley knew.

He took a table and sat down just as Thar entered the dining room. The latter’s broad smile momentarily removed Hockley’s doubts. The smile hadn’t changed. And there was the same expression of devilish disregard for the established order. The same warm friendliness. It baffled Hockley to understand how Thar could have failed to remember Earth was his home.

Thar mentioned it as he came up and took Hockley’s hand. “I’m terribly sorry,” he said. “It was stupid to forget that Earth meant Sherman Hockley.”

“I know how it is. I should have written. I guess I’m the one who owes a letter.”

“No, I think not,” said Thar.

They sat on opposite sides of a small table near a window and ordered drinks. On the field they could see the vast, shadowy outline of the Ryke vessel.

Thar was of a race genetically close to the Rykes. He lacked the feathery covering, but this was replaced by a layer of thin scales, which had a tendency to stand on edge when he was excited. He also wore a breathing piece, and carried the small shoulder tank with a faint air of superiority.

Hockley watched him with a growing sense of loss. The first impression had been more nearly correct. Thar hadn’t wanted to meet him.

“It’s been a long time,” said Hockley lamely. “I guess there isn’t much we did back there that means anything now.”

“You shouldn’t say that,” said Thar as if recognizing he had been too remote. “Every hour of our acquaintance meant a great deal to me. I’ll never forgive myself for forgetting—but tell me how you learned I was aboard the Ryke ship.”

“The Rykes have made us an offer. I wanted to find out the effects on worlds that had accepted. I learned Janisson VIII was one, so I started looking.”

"I'm so very glad you did, Sherm. You want me to confirm, of course, the advisability of accepting the offer Liacan has made."

"Confirm—or deny it," said Hockley.

Thar spread his clawlike hands. "Deny it? The most glorious opportunity a planet could possibly have?"

Something in Thar's voice gave Hockley a sudden chill. "How has it worked on your own world?"

"Janisson VIII has turned from a slum to a world of mansions. Our economic problems have been solved. Health and long life are routine. There is nothing we want that we cannot have for the asking."

"But are you *satisfied* with it? Is there nothing which you had to give up that you would like returned?"

Waldon Thar threw back his head and laughed in high pitched tones. "I might have known that would be the question you would ask! Forgive me, friend Sherman, but I had almost forgotten how unventuresome you are.

"Your question is ridiculous. Why should we wish to go back to our economic inequalities, poverty and distress, our ignorant plodding research in science? You can answer your own question."

They were silent for a moment. Hockley thought his friend would have gladly terminated their visit right there and returned to his ship. To forestall this, he leaned across the table and asked, "Your science—what has become of that?"

"Our science! We never had any. We were ignorant children playing with mud and rocks. We knew nothing. We had nothing. Until the Rykes offered to educate us."

"Surely you don't believe that," said Hockley quietly. "The problem you worked on at the Institute—gravity at micro-cosmic levels. That was not a childish thing."

Thar laughed shortly and bitterly. "What disillusionment you have coming, friend Sherman! If you only knew how truly childish it was. Wait until you learn from the Rykes the true conception of gravity, its nature and the part it plays in the structure of matter."

Hockley felt a sick tightening within him. This was not the Waldon Thar, the wild demon who thrust aside all authority and rumor in his own headlong search for knowledge. It couldn't be Thar who was sitting passively by, being *told* what the nature of the Universe is.

"Your scientists—?" Hockley persisted. "What has become of all your researchers?"

"The answer is the same," said Thar. "We had no science. We had no scientists. Those who once went by that name have become for the first time honest students knowing the pleasure of studying at the feet

of masters."

"You have set up laboratories in which your researches are supervised by the Rykes?"

"Laboratories? We have no need of laboratories. We have workshops and study rooms where we try to absorb that which the Rykes discovered long ago. Maybe at some future time we will come to a point where we can reach into the frontier of knowledge with our own minds, but this does not seem likely now."

"So you have given up all original research of your own?"

"How could we do otherwise? The Rykes have all the answers to any question we have intelligence enough to ask. Follow them, Sherman. It is no disgrace to be led by such as the Ryke teachers."

"Don't you ever long," said Hockley, "to take just one short step on your own two feet?"

"Why crawl when you can go by trans-light carrier?"

Thar sipped the last of his drink and glanced toward the wall clock. "I must go. I can understand the direction of your questions and your thinking. You hesitate because you might lose the chance to play in the mud and count the pretty pebbles in the sand. Put away childish things. You will never miss them!"

They shook hands, and a moment later Hockley said goodbye to Thar at the entrance to the field. "I know Earth will accept," said Thar. "And you and I should not have lost contact—but we'll make up for it."

Watching him move toward the dark hulk of the ship, Hockley wondered if Thar actually believed that. In less than an hour they had exhausted all they had to say after twenty years. Hockley had the information he needed about the Ryke plan, but he wished he could have kept his old memories of his student friend. Thar was drunk on the heady stuff being peddled by the Rykes, and if what he said were true, it was strong enough to intoxicate a whole planet.

His blood grew cold at the thought. This was more than a fight for the National Laboratories. It was a struggle to keep all Mankind from becoming what Thar had become.

If he could have put Thar on exhibition in the meeting tomorrow, and shown what he was once like, he would have made his point. But Thar, before and after, was not available for exhibit. He had to find another way to show his colleagues and the Senators what the Rykes would make of them.

He glanced at his watch. They wouldn't like being wakened at this hour, but neither would the scientists put up much resistance to his request for support in Markham's meeting. He went back to the bar and called each of his colleagues who had been in the meeting that day.

Hockley was called first when the assembly convened at ten that morning. He rose slowly from his seat near Markham and glanced over the somewhat puzzled expressions of the scientists.

"I don't know that I can speak for the entire group of scientists present," he said. "We met yesterday and found some differences of opinion concerning this offer. While it is true there is overwhelming sentiment supporting it, certain questions remain, which we feel require additional data in order to be answered properly.

"While we recognize that official acceptance can be given to the Rykes with no approval whatever from the scientists, it seems only fair that we should have every opportunity to make what we consider a proper study and to express our opinions in the matter.

"To the non-scientist—and perhaps to many of my colleagues—it may seem inconceivable that there could be any questions whatever. But we wonder about the position of students of future generations, we wonder about the details of administration of the program, we wonder about the total effects of the program upon our society as a whole. We wish to ask permission to make further study of the matter in an effort to answer these questions and many others. We request permission to go as a committee to Rykeman III and make a first hand study of what the Rykes propose to do, how they will teach us, and how they will dispense the information they so generously offer.

"I ask that you consider this most seriously, and make an official request of the Rykes to grant us such opportunity for study, that you provide the necessary appropriations for the trip. I consider it most urgent that this be done at once."

There was a stir of concern and disapproval from Congressional members as Hockley sat down. Senators leaned to speak in whispers to their neighbors, but Hockley observed the scientists remained quiet and impassive. He believed he had sold them in his telephone calls during the early morning. They liked the idea of obtaining additional data. Besides, most of them wanted to see Rykeman III for themselves.

Senator Markham finally stood up, obviously disturbed by Hockley's abrupt proposal. "It has seemed to us members of the Committee that there could hardly be any need for more data than is already available to us. The remarkable effects of Ryke science on other backward worlds is common knowledge.

"On the other hand we recognize the qualifications of you gentlemen which make your request appear justified. We will have to discuss this at length, but at the moment I believe I can say I am in sympathy with your request and can encourage my Committee to give it serious consideration."

A great deal more was said on that and subsequent days. News of

the Ryke offer was not given to the public, but the landing of the Ryke ship could not be hidden. It became known that Liacan carried his offer to other worlds and speculation was made that he offered it to Earth also. Angry questions were raised as to why the purpose of the visit was not clarified, but government silence was maintained while Hockley's request was considered.

It encountered bitter debate in the closed sessions, but permission was finally given for a junket of ninety scientists and ten senators to Rykeman III.

This could not be hidden, so the facts were modified and a story given out that the party was going to request participation in the Ryke program being offered other worlds, that Liacan's visit had not been conclusive.

In the days preceding the take-off Hockley felt a sense of destiny weighing heavily upon him. He read every word of the stream of opinion that flowed through the press. Every commentator and columnist seemed called upon to make his own specific analysis of the possibilities of the visit to Rykeman III. And the opinions were almost uniform that it would be an approach to Utopia to have the Rykes take over. Hockley was sickened by this mass conversion to the siren call of the Rykes.

It was a tremendous relief when the day finally came and the huge transport ship lifted solemnly into space.

Most of the group were in the ship's lounge watching the television port as the Earth drifted away beneath them. Senator Markham seemed nervous and almost frightened, Hockley thought, as if something intangible had escaped him.

"I hope we're not wasting our time," he said. "Not that I don't understand your position," he added hastily to cover the show of antagonism he sensed creeping into his voice.

"We appreciate your support," said Hockley, "and we'll do our best to see the time of the investigation is not wasted."

But afterwards, when the two of them were alone by the screen, Silvers spoke to Hockley soberly. The mathematician had lost some of the wild exuberance he'd had at first. It had been replaced by a deep, intense conviction that nothing must stand in the way of Earth's alliance with the Rykes.

"We all understand why you wanted us to come," he said. "We know you believe this delay will cool our enthusiasm. It's only fair to make clear that it won't. How you intend to change us by taking us to the home of the Rykes has got us all baffled. The reverse will be true, I am very sure. We intend to make it clear to the Rykes that we accept their offer. I hope you have no plan to make a declaration to the contrary."

Hockley kept his eyes on the screen, watching the green sphere of Earth. “I have no intention of making any statement of any kind. I was perfectly honest when I said our understanding of the Rykes would profit by this visit. You all agreed. I meant nothing more nor less than what I said. I hope no one in the group thinks otherwise.”

“We don’t know,” said Silvers.

“It’s just that you’ve got us wondering how you expect to change our views.”

“I have not said that is my intention.”

“Can you say it is not?”

“No, I cannot say that. But the question is incomplete. My whole intention is to discover as fully as possible what will be the result of alliance with the Rykes. If you should conclude that it will be unfavorable that will be the result of your own direct observations and computations, not of my arguments.”

“You may be sure that is one thing that will not occur,” said Silvers.

It took them a month to reach a transfer point where they could change to a commercial vessel using Ryke principles. In the following week they covered a distance several thousand times that which they had already come. And then they were on Rykeman III.

A few of them had visited the planet previously, on vacation trips or routine study expeditions, but most of them were seeing it for the first time. While well out into space the group began crowding the vision screens which brought into range the streets and buildings of the cities. They could see the people walking and riding there.

Hockley caught his breath at the sight, and doubts overwhelmed him, telling him he was an utter and complete fool. The city upon which he looked was a jewel of perfection. Buildings were not indiscriminate masses of masonry and metal and plastic heaped up without regard to the total effect. Rather, the city was a unit created with an eye to esthetic perfection.

Silvers stood beside Hockley. “We’ve got a chance to make Earth look that way,” said the mathematician.

“There’s only one thing missing,” said Hockley. “The price tag. We still need to know what it’s going to cost.”

Upon landing, the Earthmen were greeted by a covey of their bird-like hosts who scurried about, introducing themselves in their high whistling voices. In busses, they were moved half way across the city to a building which stood beside an enormous park area.

It was obviously a building designed for the reception of just such delegations as this one, giving Hockley evidence that perhaps his idea was not so original after all. It was a relief to get inside after their

brief trip across the city. Gravity, temperature, and air pressure and composition duplicated those of Earth inside, and conditions could be varied to accommodate many different species. Hockley felt confident they could become accustomed to outside conditions after a few days, but it was exhausting now to be out for long.

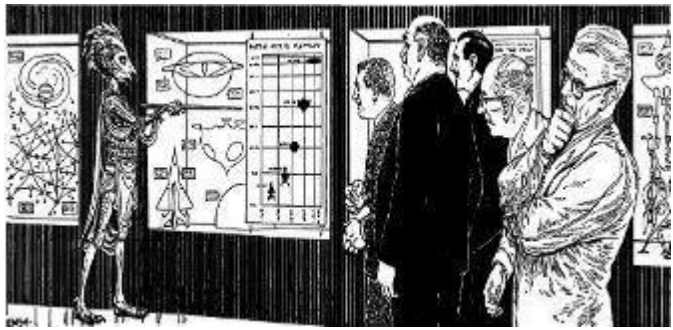
They were shown to individual quarters and given leisure to unpack and inspect their surroundings. Furniture had been adjusted to their size and needs. The only oversight Hockley could find was a faint odor of chlorine lingering in the closets. He wondered who the last occupant of the room had been.

After a noon meal, served with foods of astonishingly close approximation to their native fare, the group was offered a prelude to the general instruction and indoctrination which would begin the following day. This was in the form of a guided tour through the science museum which, Hockley gathered, was a modernized Ryke parallel to the venerable Smithsonian back home. The tour was entirely optional, as far as the planned program of the Rykes was concerned, but none of the Earthmen turned it down.

Hockley tried to concentrate heavily on the memory of Waldon Thar and keep the image of his friend always before him as he moved through the city and inspected the works of the Rykes. He found it helped suppress the awe and adulation which he had an impulse to share with his companions.

It was possible even, he found, to adopt a kind of truculent cynicism toward the approach the Rykes were making. The visit to the science museum *could* be an attempt to bowl them over with an eon-long vista of Ryke superiority in the sciences. At least that was most certainly the effect on them. Hockley cursed his own feeling of ignorance and inferiority as the guide led them quietly past the works of the masters, offering but little comment, letting them see for themselves the obvious relationships.

In the massive display showing developments of spaceflight, the atomic vessels, not much different from Earthmen's best efforts, were far down the line, very near to the earliest attempts of the Rykes to rocket their way into space. Beyond that level was an incredible series of developments incomprehensible to most of the Earthmen.



And to all their questions the guide offered the monotonous reply: “That will be explained to you later. We only wish to give you an overall picture of our culture at the present time.”

But this was not enough for one of the astronomers, named Moore, who moved ahead of Hockley in the crowd. Hockley saw the back of Moore’s neck growing redder by the minute as the guide’s evasive answer was repeated. Finally, Moore forced a discussion regarding the merits of some systems of comparing the brightness of stars, which the guide briefly showed them. The guide, in great annoyance, burst out with a stream of explanation that completely flattened any opinions Moore might have had. But at the same time the astronomer grinned amiably at the Ryke. “That ought to settle that,” he said. “I’ll bet it won’t take a week to get our system changed back home.”

Moore’s success loosened the restraint of the others and they beseiged the guide mercilessly then with opinions, questions, comparisons—and even mild disapprovals. The guide’s exasperation was obvious—and pleasant—to Hockley, who remained a bystander. It was frightening to Markham and some of the other senators who were unable to take part in the discussion. But most of the scientists failed to notice it in their eagerness to learn.

After dinner that night they gathered in the lounge and study of their quarters. Markham stood beside Hockley as they partook cautiously of the cocktails which the Rykes had attempted to duplicate for them. The Senator’s awe had returned to overshadow any concern he felt during the events of the afternoon. “A wonderful day!” he said. “Even though this visit delays completion of our arrangements with the Rykes those of us here will be grateful forever that you proposed it. Nothing could have so impressed us all with the desirability of accepting the Ryke’s tutelage. It was a stroke of genius, Dr. Hockley. And for a time I thought you were actually opposed to the Rykes!”

He sipped his drink while Hockley said nothing. Then his brow furrowed a bit. “But I wonder why our guide cut short our tour this afternoon. If I recall correctly he said at the beginning there was a great deal more to see than he actually showed us.”

Hockley smiled and sipped politely at his drink before he set it down and faced the Senator. “I was wondering if anyone else noticed that,” he said.

Hockley slept well that night except for the fact that occasional whiffs of chlorine seemed to drift from various corners of the room even though he turned the air-conditioning system on full blast.

In the morning there began a series of specialized lectures which had been prepared in accordance with the Earthmen’s request to acquaint them with what they would be getting upon acceptance of the Ryke offer.

It was obviously no new experience for the Rykes. The lectures were well prepared and anticipated many questions. The only thing new about it, Hockley thought, was the delivery in the language of the Earthmen. Otherwise, he felt this was something prepared a long time ago and given a thousand times or more.

They were divided into smaller groups according to their specialties, electronic men going one way, astronomers and mathematical physicists another, chemists and general physicists in still another direction. Hockley, Showalter and the senators were considered more or less free floating members of the delegation with the privilege of visiting with one group or another according to their pleasure.

Hockley chose to spend the first day with the chemists, since that was his own first love. Dr. Showalter and Senator Markham came along with him. As much as he tried he found it virtually impossible not to sit with the same open-mouthed wonder that his colleagues exhibited. The swift, free-flowing exposition of the Ryke lecturer led them immediately beyond their own realms, but so carefully did he lead them that it seemed that they must have come this way before, and forgotten it.

Hockley felt half angry with himself. He felt he had allowed himself to be hypnotized by the skill of the Ryke, and wondered despairingly if there were any chance at all of combating their approach. He saw nothing to indicate it in the experience of that day or the ones immediately following. But he retained hope that there was much significance in the action of the guide who had cut short their visit to the museum.

In the evenings, in the study lounge of the dormitory, they held interminable bull sessions exchanging and digesting what they had been shown during the day. It was at the end of the third day that Hockley thought he could detect a subtle change in the group. He had some difficulty analyzing it at first. It seemed to be a growing aliveness, a sort of recovery. And then he recognized that the initial

stunned reaction to the magnificence of the Rykes was passing off. They had been shocked by the impact of the Rykes, almost as if they had been struck a blow on the head. Temporarily, they had shelved all their own analytical and critical facilities and yielded to the Rykes without question.

Now they were beginning to recover, springing back to a condition considerably nearer normal. Hockley felt a surge of encouragement as he detected a more sharply critical evaluation in the conversations that buzzed around him. The enthusiasm was more measured.

It was the following evening, however, that witnessed the first event of pronounced shifting of anyone's attitude. They had finished dinner and were gathering in the lounge, sparring around, setting up groups for the bull sessions that would go until long after midnight. Most of them had already settled down and were talking part in conversations or were listening quietly when they were suddenly aware of a change in the atmosphere of the room.

For a moment there was a general turning of heads to locate the source of the disturbance. Hockley knew he could never describe just what made him look around, but he was abruptly conscious that Dr. Silvers was walking into the lounge and looking slowly about at those gathered there. Something in his presence was like the sudden appearance of a thundercloud, his face seemed to reflect the dark turbulence of a summer storm.

He said nothing, however, to anyone but strode over and sat beside Hockley, who was alone at the moment smoking the next to last of his Earthside cigars. Hockley felt the smouldering turmoil inside the mathematician. He extended his final cigar. Silvers brushed it away.

"The last one," said Hockley mildly. "In spite of all their abilities the Ryke imitations are somewhat less than natural."

Silvers turned slowly to face Hockley. "I presented them with the Legrandian Equations today," he said. "I expected to get a straightforward answer to a perfectly legitimate scientific question. That is what we were led to expect, was it not?"

Hockley nodded. “That’s my impression. Did you get something less than a straightforward answer?”

The mathematician exhaled noisily. “The Legrandian Equations will lead to a geometry as revolutionary as Riemann’s was in his day. But I was told by the Rykes that I ‘should dismiss it from all further consideration. It does not lead to any profitable mathematical development.’”

Hockley felt that his heart most certainly skipped a beat, but he managed to keep his voice steady, and sympathetic. “That’s too bad. I know what high hopes you had. I suppose you will give up work on the Equations now?”

“I will not!” Silvers exclaimed loudly. Nearby groups who had returned hesitantly to their own conversations now stared at him again. But abruptly he changed his tone and looked almost pleadingly at Hockley. “I don’t understand it. Why should they say such a thing? It appears to be one of the most profitable avenues of exploration I have encountered in my whole career. And the Rykes brush it aside!”

“What did you say when they told you to give it up?”

“I said I wanted to know where the development would lead. I said it had been indicated that we could have an answer to any scientific problem within the range of their abilities, and certainly this is, from what I’ve seen.

“The instructor replied that I’d been given an answer to my question, that ‘the first lesson you must learn if you wish to acquire our pace in science is to recognize that we have been along the path ahead of you. We know which are the possibilities that are worthwhile to develop. We have gained our speed by learning to bypass every

avenue but the main one, and not get lost in tempting side roads.'

"He said that we've got to learn to trust them and take their word as to which is the correct and profitable field of research, that 'we will show you where to go, as we agreed to do. If you are not willing to accept our leadership in this respect our agreement means nothing.' Wouldn't that be a magnificent way to make scientific progress!"

The mathematician shifted in his chair as if trying to control an internal fury that would not be capped. He held out his hand abruptly. "I'll take that cigar after all, if you don't mind, Hockley."

With savage energy he chewed the end and ignited the cigar, then blew a mammoth cloud of smoke ceilingward. "I think the trouble must be in our lecturer," he said. "He's crazy. He couldn't possibly represent the conventional attitude of the Rykes. They promised to give answers to our problems—and this is the kind of nonsense I get. I'm going to see somebody higher up and find out why we can't have a lecturer who knows what he's talking about. Or maybe you or Markham would rather take it up—through official channels, as it were?"

"The Ryke was correct," said Hockley. "He *did* give you an answer."

"He could answer *all* our questions that way!"

"You're perfectly right," said Hockley soberly. "He could do exactly that."

"They won't of course," said Silvers, defensively. "Even if this particular character isn't just playing the screwball, my question is just a special case. It's just one particular thing they consider to be valueless. Perhaps in the end I'll find they're right—but I'm going to develop a solution to these Equations if it takes the rest of my life!

"After all, they admit they have no solution, that they have not bothered to go down this particular side path, as they put it. If we don't go down it how can we ever know whether it's worthwhile or not? How can the Rykes know what they may have missed by not doing so?"

"I can't answer that," said Hockley. "For us or for them, I know of no other way to predict the outcome of a specific line of research except to carry it through and find out what lies at the end of the road."

Hockley didn't sleep very well after he finally went to bed that night. Silvers had presented him with the break he had been expecting and hoping for. The first chink in the armor of sanctity surrounding the Rykes. Now he wondered what would follow, if this would build up to the impassable barrier he wanted, or if it would merely remain a sore obstacle in their way but eventually be bypassed and forgotten.

He did not believe it would be the only incident of its kind. There would be others as the Earthmen's stunned, blind acceptance gave way completely to sound, critical evaluation. And in any case there was one delegate who would never be the same again. No matter how he eventually rationalized it Dr. Forman K. Silvers would never feel quite the same about the Rykes as he did before they rejected his favorite piece of research.

Hockley arose early, eager but cautious, his senses open for further evidence of disaffection springing up. He joined the group of chemists once more for the morning lecture. The spirit of the group was markedly higher than when he first met with them. They had been inspired by what the Rykes had shown them, but in addition their own sense of judgment had been brought out of suspension.

The Ryke lecturer began inscribing on the board an enormous organic formula, using conventions of Earth chemistry for the benefit of his audience. He explained at some length a number of transformations which it was possible to make in the compound by means of high intensity fields.

Almost at once, one of the younger chemists named Dr. Carmen, was on his feet exclaiming excitedly that one of the transformation compounds was a chemical on which he had conducted an extensive research. He had produced enough to know that it had a multitude of intriguing properties, and now he was exuberant at the revelation of a method of producing it in quantity and also further transforming it.

At his sudden enthusiasm the lecturer's face took on what they had come to recognize as a very dour look. "That series of transformations has no interest for us," he said. "I merely indicated its existence to show one of the possibilities which should be avoided. Over here you see the direction in which we wish to go."

"But you never saw anything with properties like that!" Carmen protested. "It goes through an incredible series of at least three crystalline-liquid phase changes with an increase in pressure alone. But with proper control of heat it can be kept in the crystalline phase regardless of pressure. It is closely related to a drug series with anesthetic properties, and is almost sure to be valuable in—"

The Ryke lecturer cut him off sharply. "I have explained," he said, "the direction of transformation in which we are interested. Your concern is not with anything beyond the boundaries which our study has proven to be the direct path of research and study."

"Then I should abandon research on this series of chemicals?" Carmen asked with a show of outward meekness.

The Ryke nodded with pleasure at Carmen's submissiveness. "That is it precisely. We have been over this ground long ago. We know where the areas of profitable study lie. You will be told what to

observe and what to ignore. How could you ever hope to make progress if you stopped to examine every alternate probability and possibility that appeared to you?" He shook his head vigorously and his plume vibrated with emotion.

"You must have a plan," he continued. "A goal. Study of the Universe cannot proceed in any random, erratic fashion. You must know what you want and then find out where to look for it."

Carmen sat down slowly. Hockley was sure the Ryke did not notice the tense bulge of the chemist's jaw muscles. Perhaps he would not have understood the significance if he had noticed.

Hockley was a trifle late in getting to the dining room at lunch time that day. By the time he did so the place was like a beehive. He was almost repelled by the furor of conversation circulating in the room as he entered.

He passed through slowly, searching for a table of his own. He paused a moment behind Dr. Carmen, who was declaiming in no mild terms his opinions of a system that would pre-select those areas of research which were to be entered and those which were not. He smiled a little as he caught the eye of one of the dozen chemists seated at the table, listening.

Moving on, he observed that Silvers had also cornered a half dozen or so of his colleagues in his own field and was in earnest conversation with them—in a considerably more restrained manner, however, than he had used the previous evening with Hockley, or than Carmen was using at the present time.

The entire room was abuzz with similar groups.

The senators had tried to mingle with the others in past days, always with more or less lack of success because they found themselves out of the conversation almost completely. Today they had no luck whatever. They were seated together at a couple of tables in a corner. None of them seemed to be paying attention to the food before them, but were glancing about, half-apprehensively, at their fellow diners—who were also paying no attention to food.

Hockley caught sight of his political colleagues and sensed their dismay. The field of disquietude seemed almost tangible in the air. The senators seemed half frightened by what they felt but could not understand.

Showalter's wild waving at the far corner of the room finally caught Hockley's eye and he moved toward the small table which the assistant had reserved for them. Showalter was upset, too, by the atmosphere within the room.

"What the devil is up?" he said. "Seems like everybody's on edge this morning. I never saw a bunch of guys so touchy. You'd think they

woke up with snakes in their beds."

"Didn't you know?" said Hockley. "Haven't you been to any of the lectures this morning?"

"No. A couple of the senators were getting bored with all the scientific doings so I thought maybe I should try to entertain them. We took in what passes for such here, but it wasn't much better than the lectures as a show. Tell me what's up."

Briefly, Hockley described Silvers' upset of the day before and Carmen's experience that morning. Showalter let his glance rove over his fellow Earthmen, trying to catch snatches of the buzzing conversation at nearby tables.

"You think that's the kind of thing that's got them all going this morning?" he said.

Hockley nodded. "I caught enough of it passing through to know that's what it is. I gather that every group has run into the same kind of thing by now, the fencing off of broad areas where we have already tried to do research.

"After the first cloud of awe wore off, the first thing everyone wanted was an answer to his own pet line of research. Nine times out of ten it was something the Rykes told them to chuck down the drain. That advice doesn't sit so well—as you can plainly see."

Showalter drew back his gaze and stared for a long time at Hockley. "You knew this would happen. That's why you brought us here—"

"I had hopes of it. I was reasonably sure this was the way the Rykes operated."

Showalter remained thoughtful for a long time before he spoke again. "You've won your point, I suppose, as far as this group goes, but you can't hope to convince all of Earth by this. The Rykes will hold their offer open, and others will accept it on behalf of Earth.

"And what if it's we who are wrong, in the end? How can you be sure that this isn't the way the Rykes have made their tremendous speed—by not going down all the blind alleys that we rattle around in."

"I'm sure it *is* the way they have attained such speed of advancement."

"Then maybe we ought to go along, regardless of our own desires. Maybe we never did know how to do research!"

Hockley smiled across the table at his assistant. "You believe that, of course."

"I'm just talking," said Showalter irritably. "The thing gets more loopy every day. If you think you understand the Rykes I wish you would give out with what the score is. By the looks of most of these guys I would say they are getting ready to throttle the next Ryke they

see instead of knuckle under to him."

"I hope you're right," said Hockley fervently. "I certainly hope you're right."

By evening there was increasing evidence that he was. Hockley passed up the afternoon lecture period and spent the time in the lounge doing some thinking of his own. He knew he couldn't push the group. Above all, he mustn't give way to any temptation to push them or say, "I told you so." Their present frustration was so deep that their antagonism could be turned almost indiscriminately in any direction, and he would be offering himself as a ready target if he were not careful.

On the other hand he had to be ready to take advantage of their disaffection and throw them a decisive challenge when they were ready for it. That might be tonight, or it might be another week. He wished for a sure way of knowing. As things turned out, however, the necessity of choosing the time was taken from him.

After dinner that night, when the group began to drift into the lounge, Silvers and Carmen and three of the other men came over to where Hockley sat. Silvers fumbled with the buttons of his coat as if preparing to make an address.

"We'd like to request," he said, "that is—we think we ought to get together. We'd like you to call a meeting, Hockley. Some of us have a few things we'd like to talk over."

Hockley nodded, his face impassive.

"The matter I mentioned to you the other night," said Silvers. "It's been happening to all the men. We think we ought to talk about it."

"Fine," said Hockley. "I've been thinking it would perhaps be a good idea. Pass the word around and let's get some chairs. We can convene in ten minutes."

The others nodded somberly and moved away with all the enthusiasm of preparing for a funeral. And maybe that's what it would be, Hockley thought—somebody's funeral. He hoped it would be the Rykes.

The room began filling almost at once, as if they had been expecting the call. In little more than five minutes it seemed that every member of the Earth delegation had assembled, leaving time to spare.

The senators still wore their looks of puzzlement and half-frightened anxiety, which had intensified if anything. There was no puzzlement on the faces of the scientists, however, only a set and determined expression that Hockley hardly dared interpret as meaning they had made up their minds. He had to have their verbal confirmation.

Informally, he thrust his hands in his pockets and sauntered to the front of the group.

"I have been asked to call a meeting," he said, "by certain members of the group who have something on their minds. They seem to feel we'd all be interested in what is troubling them. Since I have nothing in particular to say I'm simply going to turn the floor over to those of you who have. Dr. Silvers first approached me to call this discussion, so I shall ask him to lead off. Will you come to the front, Dr. Silvers?"

The mathematician rose as if wishing someone else would do the talking. He stood at one side of the group, halfway to the rear. "I can do all right from here," he said.

After a pause, as if coming to a momentous decision, he plunged into his complaint. "It appears that nearly all of us have encountered an aspect of the Ryke culture and character which was not anticipated when we first received their offer." Briefly, he related the details of the Ryke rejection of his research on the Legrandian Equations.

"We were told we were going to have all our questions answered, that the Ryke's science included all we could anticipate or hope to accomplish in the next few millenia. I swallowed that. We all did. It appears we were slightly in error. It begins to appear as if we are not going to find the intellectual paradise we anticipated."

He smiled wryly. "I'm sure none of you is more ready than I to admit he has been a fool. It appears that paradise, so-called, consists merely of a few selected gems which the Rykes consider particularly valuable, while the rest of the field goes untouched.

"I want to offer public apologies to Dr. Hockley, who saw and understood the situation as it actually existed, while the rest of us had our heads in the clouds. Exactly how he knew, I'm not sure, but he did, and very brilliantly chose the only way possible to convince us that what he knew was correct.

"I suggest we do our packing tonight, gentlemen. Let us return at once to our laboratories and spend the rest of our lives in some degree of atonement for being such fools as to fall for the line the Rykes tried to sell us."

Hockley's eyes were on the senators. At first there were white faces filled with incredulity as the mathematician proceeded. Then slowly this changed to sheer horror.

When Silvers finished, there was immediate bedlam. There was a clamor of voices from the scientists, most of whom seemed to be trying to affirm Silvers' position. This was offset by explosions of rage from the senatorial members of the group.

Hockley let it go, not even raising his hands for order until finally the racket died of its own accord as the eyes of the delegates came to

rest upon him.

And then, before he could speak, Markham was on his feet. “This is absolutely moral treachery,” he thundered. “I have never heard a more vicious revocation of a pledged word than I have heard this evening.

“You men are not alone concerned in this matter. For all practical purposes you are not concerned at all! And yet to take it upon yourselves to pass judgment in a matter that is the affair of the entire population of Earth—out of nothing more than sheer spite because the Rykes refuse recognition of your own childish projects! I have never heard a more incredible and infantile performance than you supposedly mature gentlemen of science are expressing this evening.”

He glared defiantly at Hockley, who was again the center of attention moving carelessly to the center of the stage. “Anybody want to try to answer the Senator?” he asked casually.

Instantly, a score of men were on their feet, speaking simultaneously. They stopped abruptly, looking deferentially to their neighbors and at Hockley, inviting him to choose one of them to be spokesman.

“Maybe I ought to answer him myself,” said Hockley, “since I predicted that this would occur, and that we ought to make a trial run before turning our collective gray matter over to the Rykes.”

A chorus of approval and nodding heads gave him the go ahead.

“The Senator is quite right in saying that we few are not alone in our concern in this matter,” he said. “But the Senator intends to imply a major difference between us scientists and the rest of mankind. This is his error.

“Every member of Mankind who is concerned about the Universe in which he lives, is a scientist. You need to understand what a scientist is—and you can say no more than that he is a human being trying to solve the problem of understanding his Universe, immediate or remote. He is concerned about the inanimate worlds, his own personality, his fellow men—and the interweaving relationships among all these factors. We professional scientists are no strange species, alien to our race. Our only difference is perhaps that we undertake *more* problems than does the average of our fellow men, and of a more complex kind. That is all.

“The essence of our science is a relentless personal yearning to know and understand the Universe. And in that, the scientist must not be forbidden to ask whatever question occurs to him. The moment we put any restraint upon our fields of inquiry, or set bounds to the realms of our mental aspirations, our science ceases to exist and becomes a mere opportunist technology.”

Markham stood up, his face red with exasperation and rage. “No

one is trying to limit you! Why is that so unfathomable to your minds? You are being offered a boundless expanse, and you continue to make inane complaints of limitations. The Rykes have been over all the territory you insist on exploring. They can tell you the number of pretty pebbles and empty shells that lie there. You are like children insistent upon exploring every shadowy corner and peering behind every useless bush on a walk through the forest.

"Such is to be expected of a child, but not of an adult, who is capable of taking the word of one who has been there before!"

"There are two things wrong with your argument," said Hockley. "First of all, there is no essential difference between the learning of a child who must indeed explore the dark corners and strange growths by which he passes—there is no difference between this and the probing of the scientist, who must explore the Universe with his own senses and with his own instruments, without taking another's word that there is nothing there worth seeing.

"Secondly, the Rykes themselves are badly in error in asserting that they have been along the way ahead of us. They have not. In all their fields of science they have limited themselves badly to one narrow field of probability. They have taken a narrow path stretching between magnificent vistas on either side of them, and have deliberately ignored all that was beyond the path and on the inviting side trails."

"Is there anything wrong with that?" demanded Markham. "If you undertake a journey you don't weave in and out of every possible path that leads in every direction opposed to your destination. You take the direct route. Or at least *ordinary* people do."

"Scientists do, too," said Hockley, "when they take a journey. Professional science is not a journey, however. It's an exploration.

"There is a great deal wrong with what the Rykes have done. They have assumed, and would have us likewise assume, that there is a certain very specific future toward which we are all moving. This future is built out of the discoveries they have made about the Universe. It is made of the system of mathematics they have developed, which exclude Dr. Silvers' cherished Legrandian Equations. It excludes the world in which exist Dr. Carmen's series of unique compounds.

"The Rykes have built a wonderful, workable world of serenity, beauty, scientific consistency, and economic adjustment. They have eliminated enormous amounts of chaos which Earthmen continue to suffer.

"But we do not want what the Rykes have obtained—if we have to pay their price for it."

"Then you are complete fools," said Markham. "Fortunately, you

cannot and will not speak for all of Earth."

Hockley paced back and forth a half dozen steps, his eyes on the floor. "I think we do—and can—speak for all our people," he said. "Remember, I said that all men are scientists in the final analysis. I am very certain that no Earthman who truly understood the situation would want to face the future which the Rykes hold out to us."

"And why not?" demanded Markham.

"Because there are too many possible futures. We refuse to march down a single narrow trail to *the* golden future. That's what the Rykes would have us do. But they are wrong. It would be like taking a trip through a galaxy at speeds faster than light—and claiming to have seen the galaxy. What the Rykes have obtained is genuine and good, but what they have not obtained is perhaps far better and of greater worth."

"How can you know such an absurd thing?"

"We can't—not for sure," said Hockley. "Not until we go there and see for ourselves, step by step. But we aren't going to be confined to the Rykes' narrow trail. We are going on a broad path to take in as many byways as we can possibly find. We'll explore every probability we come to, and look behind every bush and under every pebble.

"We will move together, the thousands and the millions of us, simultaneously, interacting with one another, exchanging data. Most certainly, many will end up in blind alleys. Some will find data that seems the ultimate truth at one point and pure deception at another. Who can tell ahead of time which of these multiple paths we should take? Certainly not the Rykes, who have bypassed most of them!

"It doesn't matter that many paths lead to failure—not as long as we remain in communication with each other. In the end we will find the best possible future for us. But there is no *one* future, only a multitude of possible futures. We must have the right to build the one that best fits our own kind."

"Is that more important than achieving immediately a more peaceful, unified, and secure society?" said Markham.

"Infinitely more important!" said Hockley.

"It is fortunate at least, then, that you are in no position to implement these insane beliefs of yours. The Ryke program was offered to Earth, and it shall be accepted on behalf of Earth. You may be sure of a very poor hearing when you try to present these notions back home."

"You jump to conclusions, Senator," said Hockley with mild confidence. "Why do you suppose I proposed this trip if I did not believe I could do something about the situation? I assure you that we did not come just to see the sights."

Markham's jaw slacked and his face became white. "What do you

mean? You haven't dared to try to alienate the Rykes—"

"I mean that there is a great deal we can do about the situation. Now that the sentiments of my colleagues parallel my own I'm sure they agree that we must effectively and finally spike any possibility of Earth's becoming involved in this Ryke nonsense."

"You wouldn't dare!—even if you could—"

"We can, and we dare," said Hockley. "When we return to Earth we shall have to report that the Rykes have refused to admit Earth to their program. We shall report that we made every effort to obtain an agreement with them, but it was in vain. If anyone wishes to verify the report, the Rykes themselves will say that this is quite true: they cannot possibly consider Earth as a participant. If you contend that an offer was once made, you will not find the Rykes offering much support since they will be very busily denying that we are remotely qualified."

"The Rykes are hardly ones to meekly submit to any idiotic plan of that kind."

"They can't help it—if we demonstrate that we *are* quite unqualified to participate."

"You—you—"

"It will not be difficult," said Hockley. "The Rykes have set up a perfect teacher-pupil situation, with all the false assumptions that go with it. There is at least one absolutely positive way to disintegrate such a situation. The testimony of several thousand years' failure of our various educational systems indicates that there are quite a variety of lesser ways also—

"Perhaps you are aware of the experiences and techniques commonly employed on Earth by white men in their efforts to educate the aborigine. The first procedure is to do away with the tribal medicine men, ignore their lore and learning. Get them to give up the magic words and their pots of foul smelling liquids, abandon their ritual dances and take up the white man's great wisdom.

"We have done this time after time, only to learn decades later that the natives once knew much of anesthetics and healing drugs, and had genuine powers to communicate in ways the white man can't duplicate.

"But once in a long while a group of aborigines show more spunk than the average. They refuse to give up their medicine men, their magic and their hard earned lore accumulated over generations and centuries. Instead of giving these things up they insist on the white man's learning these mysteries in preference to *his* nonsensical and ineffective magic. They completely frustrate the situation, and if they persist they finally destroy the white man as an educator. He is forced to conclude that the ignorant savages are unteachable.

“It is an infallible technique—and one that we shall employ. Dr. Silvers will undertake to teach his mathematical lecturer in the approaches to the Legrandian Equations. He will speculate long and noisily on the geometry which potentially lies in this mathematical system. Dr. Carmen will elucidate at great length on the properties of the chain of chemicals he has been advised to abandon.

“Each of us has at least one line of research the Rykes would have us give up. That is the very thing we shall insist on having investigated. We shall teach them these things and prove Earthmen to be an unlearned, unteachable band of aborigines who refuse to pursue the single path to glory and light, but insist on following every devious byway and searching every darkness that lies beside the path.

“It ought to do the trick. I estimate it should not be more than a week before we are on our way back home, labeled by the Rykes as utterly hopeless material for their enlightenment.”

The senators seemed momentarily appalled and speechless, but they recovered shortly and had a considerable amount of high flown oratory to distribute on the subject. The scientists, however, were comparatively quiet, but on their faces was a subdued glee that Hockley had to admit was little short of fiendish. It was composed, he thought, of all the gloating anticipations of all the schoolboys who had ever put a thumbtack on the teacher’s chair.

Hockley was somewhat off in his prediction. It was actually a mere five days after the beginning of the Earthmen’s campaign that the Rykes gave them up and put them firmly aboard a vessel bound for home. The Rykes were apologetic but firm in admitting they had made a sorry mistake, that Earthmen would have to go their own hopeless way while the Rykes led the rest of the Universe toward enlightenment and glory.

Hockley, Showalter, and Silvers watched the planet drop away beneath them. Hockley could not help feeling sympathetic toward the Rykes. “I wonder what will happen,” he said slowly, “when they crash headlong into an impassable barrier on that beautiful, straight road of theirs. I wonder if they’ll ever have enough guts to turn aside?”

“I doubt it,” said Showalter. “They’ll probably curl up and call it a day.”

Silvers shook his head as if to ward off an oppressive vision. “That shouldn’t be allowed to happen,” he said. “They’ve got too much. They’ve achieved too much, in spite of their limitations. I wonder if there isn’t some way we could help them?”

THE VALLEY
By Richard Stockham
Illustrated by Ed Emsh

If you can't find it countless millions of miles in space, come back to Earth. You might find it just on the other side of the fence—where the grass is always greener.

The Ship dove into Earth's sea of atmosphere like a great, silver fish.

Inside the ship, a man and woman stood looking down at the expanse of land that curved away to a growing horizon. They saw the yellow ground cracked like a dried skin; and the polished stone of the mountains and the seas that were shrunken away in the dust. And they saw how the city circled the sea, as a circle of men surround a water hole in a desert under a blazing sun.

The ship's radio cried out. "You've made it! Thank God! You've made it!"

Another voice, shaking, said, "President—Davis is—overwhelmed. He can't go on. On his behalf and on behalf of all the people—with our hope that was almost dead, we greet you." A pause. "Please come in!"

The voice was silent. The air screamed against the hull of the ship.

"I can't tell them," said the man.

"Please come in!" said the radio. "Do you hear me?"

The woman looked up at the man. "You've got to Michael!"

"Two thousand years. From one end of the galaxy to the other. Not one grain of dust we can live on. Just Earth. And it's burned to a cinder."

A note of hysteria stabbed into the radio voice. "Are you all right? Stand by! We're sending a rescue ship."

"They've got a right to know what we've found," said the woman. "They sent us out. They've waited so long—."

He stared into space. "It's hopeless. If we'd found another planet they could live on, they'd do the same as they've done here."

He touched the tiny golden locket that hung around his neck. "Right now, I could press this and scratch myself and the whole farce would be over."

"No. A thousand of us died. You've got to think of them."

"We'll go back out into space," he said. "It's clean out there. I'm

tired. Two thousand years of reincarnation."

She spoke softly. "We've been together for a long time. I've loved you. I've asked very little. But I need to stay on Earth. Please, Michael."

He looked at her for a moment. Then he flipped a switch. "Milky Way to Earth. Never mind the rescue ship. We're all right. We're coming in."

The great, white ship settled to Earth that was like a plain after flood waters have drained away.

The man and woman came out into the blazing sunlight.

A shout, like the crashing of a thousand surfs, rose and broke over them. The man and woman descended the gang-plank toward the officials gathered on the platform. They glanced around at the massed field of white faces beneath them; saw those same faces that had been turned toward them two thousand years past; remembered the cheers and the cries that had crashed around them then, as they and the thousand had stood before the towering spires of the ships, before the takeoff.

And, as then, there were no children among the milling, grasping throng. Only the same clutching hands and voices and arms, asking for an answer, a salvation, a happy end.

Now the officials gathered around the man and the woman, and spoke to them in voices of reverence.

A microphone was thrust into Michael's hand with the whispered admonition to tell the people of the great new life waiting for them, open and green and moist, on a virgin planet.

The cries of the people were slipping away and a stillness growing like an ocean calm and, within it, the sound of the pumps, throbbing, sucking the water from the seas.

And then Michael's voice, "The thousand who left with us are dead. For some time we've known the other planets in our solar system were uninhabitable. Now we've been from one end of the galaxy to the other. And this is what we've found…. We were given Earth. There's no place else for us. The rest of the planets in the galaxy were given to others. There's no place else for them. We've all had a chance to make the best of Earth. Instead we've made the worst of it. So we're here to stay—and die." He handed the microphone back.

The silence did not change.

The President grasped Michael's arm. "What're you saying?"

A buzzing rose up from the people like that of a swarm of frightened bees. The sea of white faces swayed and their voices began to cry. The din and motion held, long and drawn out, with a wail now and a fluttering beneath it.

Michael and the woman stood above them in the center of the pale, hovering faces of the officials.

"Good God," said the President. "You've got to tell them what you said isn't true!"

"We've been searching two thousand years for a truth," said Michael. "A thousand of us have died finding it. I've told it. That's the way it's got to be."

The President swayed, took the microphone in his hands.

"There's been some mistake!" he cried. "Go back to the pumps and the distilleries! Go back to the water vats and the gardens and the flocks! Go back! Work and wait! We'll get the full truth to you. Everything's going to be *all right*!"

Obediently the mass of faces separated, as though they were being spun away on a whirling disk. Michael and the woman were swallowed up, like pebbles inside a closing hand, and carried away from the great, white ship.

They ushered the man and woman into the beamed and paneled council chambers and sat them in thick chairs before the wall of polished wood desks across which stared the line of faces, silent and waiting. And on a far wall, facing them all, hung a silver screen, fifty feet square.

The President stood. "Members of the council." He paused. "As you heard, they report—complete failure." He turned to Michael. "And now, the proof."

Michael stood beside the motion picture projector, close to his chair. The lights dimmed. There was only the sound of the pumps throbbing in the darkness close and far away, above and beneath and all around. Suddenly on the screen appeared an endless depth of blackness filled with a mass of glowing white, which extended into the room around the watching people, seeming to touch them and then spreading, like an ocean, farther away and out and out into an endless distance.

Now streaks of yellow fire shot into the picture, like a swarm of lightning bugs, the thin sharp nosed shadows of space ships, hurtling, like comets, toward the clustered star smear. And then silent thoughts flashed from the screen into the minds of the spectators; of time passing in months, years and centuries, passing and passing until they themselves seemed to be rushing and rushing into the blackness toward blinding balls of white light, the size of moons.

The dark shapes of smaller spheres circling the blinding ones moved forward into the picture; red, blue, green, yellow, purple and many mixtures of all these, and then one planet filled the screen, seeming to be inflated, like a balloon, into a shining red ball. There

was a razor edge of horizon then and pink sky and an expanse of crimson. Flat, yellow creatures lay all around, expanding and contracting. A roaring rose and fell like the roaring of a million winds. Then fear flowed out of the picture into the minds of the watchers so that they gasped and cringed, and a silent voice told them that the atmosphere of this planet would disintegrate a human being.

Now the red ball seemed to pull away from them into the blackness and the blinding balls of light, and all around could be seen the streaks of rocket flame shooting away in all directions.

Suddenly a flash cut the blackness, like the flare of a match, and died, and the watchers caught from the screen the awareness of the death of a ship.

They were also aware of the rushing of time through centuries and they saw the streaking rocket flames and planets rushing at them; saw creatures in squares and circles, in threads wriggling, in lumps and blobs, rolling jumping and crawling; saw them in cloud forms whisking about, changing their shapes, and in flowing wavelets of water. They saw creatures hopping about on one leg and others crawling at incredible speeds on a thousand; saw some with all the numbers of legs and arms in between; and were aware of creatures that were there but invisible.

And those watching the screen on which time and distance were a compressed and distilled kaleidoscope, saw planet after planet and thousands at a time; heard strange noises; rasping and roaring, clinks and whistles, screams and crying, sighing and moaning. And they were aware through all this of atmosphere and ground inimical to man, some that would evaporate at the touch of a human body, or would burst into flame, or swallow, or turn from liquid to solid or solid to liquid. They saw and heard chemical analyses, were aware of this ocean of blackness and clouds of white through which man might move, and must ever move, because he could live only upon this floating dust speck that was Earth.

The picture faded in, close to one of the long, needle nosed crafts, showing inside, a man and a woman. Time was telescoped again while the man cut a tiny piece of scar tissue from his arm and that of the woman, put them in bottles and set them into compartments where solutions dripped rhythmically into the bottles, the temperature was held at that of the human body, and synthetic sunlight focused upon them from many pencil like tubes.

The watchers in the council chamber saw the bits of tissue swell into human embryos in a few seconds, and grow arms and legs and faces and extend themselves into babies. Saw them taken from the bottles and cared for, and become replicas of the man and woman controlling the ship, who, all this time were aging, until life went out

of their bodies. Then the ones who had been the scar tissue disintegrated them in the coffin-like tubes and let their dust be sucked out into space—all this through millions of miles and a hundred years, compressed for the watchers into sixty seconds and a few feet of space.

Instantly there was black space on the screen again, with the fingers of flame pointing out behind the dark bodies of the ships.

And then the spectators saw one ship shudder and swerve into a blazing, bluish white star, like a gnat flying into a white hot poker; saw another drop away and away, out and out into the blackness past the swirling white rim of the galaxy, and sink into a dark nothingness.

Great balls of rock showered like hail onto other ships, smashing them into grotesque tin cans. The stream of fire at the tail of another ship suddenly died and the ship floated into an orbit around a great, yellow planet, ten times the size of Jupiter, then was sucked into it. Another burst like a bomb, flinging a man and woman out into the darkness, where they hung suspended, frozen into statues, like bodies drowned in the depths of an Arctic sea.

At this instant from the watching council, there were screams of horror and voices crying out, "Shut it off! Shut it off!" There was a moving about in the darkness. Murmurs and harsh cries of disapproval grew in volume.

Another ship in the picture was split down the side by a meteor and the bodies inside were impaled on jagged blades of steel, the contorted, bloody faces lighted by bursts of flame. And the screams and cries of the spectators rose higher, "Shut it off…. Oh Lord…."

Lights flashed through the room and the picture died.

Michael and Mary, both staring, saw, along the line of desks, the agonized faces, some staring like white stones, others hidden in clutching fingers, as though they had been confronted by a Medusa. There was the sound of heavy breathing that mixed with the throbbing of the pumps. The President held tightly to the edges of his desk to quiet his trembling.

"There—there've been changes," he said, "since you've been out in space. There isn't a person on Earth who's seen a violent death for hundreds of years."

Michael faced him, frowning. "I don't follow you."

"Dying violently happened so seldom on Earth that, after a long time, the sight of it began to drive some people mad. And then one day a man was struck by one of the ground cars and *everyone* who saw it went insane. Since then we've eliminated accidents, even the idea. Now, no one is aware that death by violence is even a possibility."

"I'm sorry," said Michael, "we've been so close to violent death

for so long…. What you've seen is part of the proof you asked for."

"What you showed us was a picture," said the President. "If it had been real, we'd all be insane by now. If it were shown to the people there'd be mass hysteria."

"But even if we'd found another habitable planet, getting to it would involve just what we've shown you. Maybe only a tenth of the people who left Earth, or a hundredth, would ever reach a destination out in space."

"We couldn't tolerate such a possibility," said the President gravely. "We'd have to find a way around it."

The pumps throbbed like giant hearts all through the stillness in the council chambers. The faces along the line of desks were smoothing out; the terror in them was fading away.

"And yet the Earth is almost dead," said Michael quietly, "and you can't bring it back to life."

"The sins of our past, Mr. Nelson," said the President. "The Atomic wars five thousand years ago. And the greed. It was too late a long time ago. That, of course, is why the expedition was sent out. And now you've come back to us with this terrible news." He looked around, slowly, then back to Michael. "Can you give us any hope at all?"

"None."

"Another expedition? To Andromeda perhaps? With you the leader?"

Michael shook his head. "We're finished with expeditions, Mr. President."

There were mutterings in the council, and hastily whispered consultations. Now they were watching the man and woman again.

"We feel," said the President, "it would be dangerous to allow you to go out among the people. They've been informed that your statement wasn't entirely true. This was necessary, to avoid a panic. The people simply must not know the whole truth." He paused. "Now we ask you to keep in mind that whatever we decide about the two of you will be for the good of the people."

Michael and Mary were silent.

"You'll wait outside the council chambers," the President went on, "until we have reached our decision."

As the man and woman were led away, the pumps beat in the stillness, and at the edge of the shrinking seas the salt thick waters were being pulled into the distilleries, and from them into the tier upon tier of artificial gardens that sat like giant bee hives all around the shoreline; and the mounds of salt glistening in the sunlight behind the gardens were growing into mountains.

In their rooms, Michael and Mary were talking through the hours, and waiting. All around them were fragile, form-fitting chairs and translucent walls and a ceiling that, holding the light of the sun when they had first seen it, was now filled with moonlight.

Standing at a circular window, ten feet in diameter, Michael saw, far below, the lights of the city extending into the darkness along the shoreline of the sea.

"We should have delivered our message by radio," he said, "and gone back into space."

"You could probably still go," she said quietly.

He came and stood beside her. "I couldn't stand being out in space, or anywhere, without you."

She looked up at him. "We could go out into the wilderness, Michael, outside the force walls. We could go far away."

He turned from her. "It's all dead. What would be the use?"

"I came from the Earth," she said quietly. "And I've got to go back to it. Space is so cold and frightening. Steel walls and blackness and the rockets and the little pinpoints of light. It's a prison."

"But to die out there in the desert, in that dust." Then he paused and looked away from her. "We're crazy—talking as though we had a choice."

"Maybe they'll have to *give* us a choice."

"What're you talking about?"

"They went into hysterics at the sight of those bodies in the picture. Those young bodies that didn't die of old age."

He waited.

"They can't stand the sight of people dying violently."

Her hand went to her throat and touched the tiny locket.

"These lockets were given to us so we'd have a choice between suffering or quick painless death…. We still have a choice."

He touched the locket at his own throat and was very still for a long moment. "So we threaten to kill ourselves, before their eyes. What would it do to them?"

He was still for a long time. "Sometimes, Mary, I think I don't know you at all." A pause. "And so now you and I are back where we started. Which'll it be, space or Earth?"

"Michael." Her voice trembled. "I—I don't know how to say this."

He waited, frowning, watching her intently.

"I'm—going to have a child."

His face went blank.

Then he stepped forward and took her by the shoulders. He saw the softness there in her face; saw her eyes bright as though the sun were shining in them; saw a flush in her cheeks, as though she had been running. And suddenly his throat was full.

"No," he said thickly. "I can't believe it."

"It's true."

He held her for a long time, then he turned his eyes aside.

"Yes, I can see it is."

"I—I can't put into words why I let it happen, Michael."

He shook his head. "I don't know—what to—to say. It's so incredible."

"Maybe—I got so—tired—just seeing the two of us over and over again and the culturing of the scar tissue, for twenty centuries. Maybe that was it. It was just—something I felt I *had* to do. Some—*real* life again. Something new. I felt a need to produce something out of myself. It all started way out in space, while we were getting close to the solar system. I began to wonder if we'd ever get out of the ship alive or if we'd ever see a sunset again or a dawn or the night or morning like we'd seen on Earth—so—so long ago. And then I *had* to let it happen. It was a vague and strange thing. There was something forcing me. But at the same time I wanted it, too. I seemed to be willing it, seemed to be feeling it was a necessary thing." She paused, frowning. "I didn't stop to think—it would be like this."

"Such a thing," he said, smiling grimly, "hasn't happened on Earth for three thousand years. I can remember in school, reading in the history books, how the whole Earth was overcrowded and how the food and water had to be rationed and then how the laws were passed forbidding birth and after that how the people died and there weren't any more babies born, until at last there was plenty of what the Earth had to give, for everyone. And then the news was broken to everyone about the culturing of the scar tissue, and there were a few dissenters but they were soon conditioned out of their dissension and the population was stabilized." He paused. "After all this past history, I don't think the council could endure what you've done."

"No," she said quietly. "I don't think they could."

"And so this will be just for *us*." He took her in his arms. "If I remember rightly, this is a traditional action." A pause. "Now I'll go with you out onto the Earth—if we can swing it. When we get outside the city, or if we do—Well, we'll see."

They were very still together and then he turned and stood by the window and looked down upon the city and she came and stood beside him.

They both saw it at the same time. And they watched, without speaking, both knowing what was in the other's mind and heart. They watched the giant four dimensional screens all through the city. A green, lush planet showed bright and clear on them and there were ships standing among the trees and men walking through the grass,

that moved gently like the swells on a calm ocean, while into their minds came the thoughts projected from the screen:

"This will be your new home. It was found and then lost. But another expedition will be sent out to find it again. Be of good hope. Everything will be all right."

Michael turned from the window. "So there's our evidence. Two thousand years. All the others killed getting it. And with a simple twist, it becomes a lie."

Mary sat down and buried her face in her hands.

"What a terrible failure there's been here," said Michael. "The neglect and destruction of a whole planet. It's like a family letting their home decay all around them, and living in smaller and smaller rooms of it, until at last the rooms are all gone, and since they can't find another home, they all die in the ruins of the last room."

"I can't face dying," Mary said quietly, "squeezed in with all these people, in this tomb they've made around the seas. I want to have the open sky and the quiet away from those awful pounding pumps when I die. I want the spread of the Earth all around and the clean air. I want to be a real part of the Earth again."

Michael barely nodded in agreement. He was standing very still now.

And then there was the sound of the door opening.

They both rose, like mourners at a funeral, and went into the council chambers.

Again they sat in the thick chairs before the wall of desks with the faces of the council looking across it like defenders.

The pumps were beating, beating all through the room and the quiet.

The President was standing. He faced Michael and Mary, and seemed to set himself as though to deliver a blow, or to receive one.

"Michael and Mary," he said, his voice struggling against a tightness, "we've considered a long time concerning what is to be done with you and the report you brought back to us from the galaxy." He took another swallow of water. "To protect the sanity of the people, we've changed your report. We've also decided that the people must be protected from the possibility of your spreading the truth, as you did at the landing field. So, for the good of the people, you'll be isolated. All comforts will be given you. After all, in a sense, you *are* heroes and martyrs. Your scar tissue will be cultured as it has been in the past, and you will stay in solitary confinement until the time when, perhaps, we can migrate to another planet. We feel that hope must not be destroyed. And so another expedition is being sent out. It may be that, in time, on another planet, you'll be able to take

your place in our society."

He paused. "Is there anything you wish to say?"

"Yes, there is."

"Proceed."

Michael stared straight at the President. After a long moment, he raised his hand to the tiny locket at his throat.

"Perhaps you remember," he said, "the lockets given to every member of the expedition the night before we left. I still have mine." He raised it. "So does my wife. They were designed to kill the wearer instantly and painlessly if he were ever faced with pain or a terror he couldn't endure."

The President was standing again. A stir ran along the barricade of desks.

"We can't endure the city," went on Michael, "or its life and the ways of the people." He glanced along the line of staring faces.

"If what I think you're about to say is true," said the President in a shaking voice, "it would have been better if you'd never been born."

"Let's face facts, Mr. President. We were *born* and haven't died—yet." A pause. "And we can kill ourselves right here before your eyes. It'd be painless to us. We'd be unconscious. But there would be horrible convulsions and grimaces. Our bodies would be twisted and torn. They'd thresh about. The deaths you saw in the picture happened a long time ago, in outer space. You all went into hysterics at the sight of them. Our deaths now would be close and terrible to see."

The President staggered as though about to faint. There was a stirring and muttering and a jumping up along the desks. Voices cried out, in anger and fear. Arms waved and fists pounded. Hands clasped and unclasped and clawed at collars, and there was a pell mell rushing around the President. They yelled at each other and clasped each other by the shoulders, turned away and back again, and then suddenly became very still.

Now they began to step down from the raised line of desks, the President leading them, and came close to the man and woman, gathering around them in a wide half circle.

Michael and Mary were holding the lockets close to their throats. The half circle of people, with the President at its center was moving closer and closer. They were sweaty faces and red ones and dry white ones and hands were raised to seize them.

Michael put his arm around Mary's waist. He felt the trembling in her body and the waiting for death.

"Stop!" he said quietly.

They halted, in slight confusion, barely drawing back.

"If you want to see us die—just come a step closer…. And

remember what'll happen to you."

The faces began turning to each other and there was an undertone of muttering and whispering. "A ghastly thing…. Instant…. Nothing to do…. Space's broken their minds…. They'll do it…. Eyes're mad…. What can we do?… What?…" The sweaty faces, the cold white ones, the flushed hot ones: all began to turn to the President, who was staring at the two before him like a man watching himself die in a mirror.

"I command you," he suddenly said, in a choked voice, "to—to give me those—lockets! It's your—duty!"

"We've only one duty, Mr. President," said Michael sharply. "To ourselves."

"You're sick. Give yourselves over to us. We'll help you."

"We've made our choice. We want an answer. Quickly! Now!"

The President's body sagged. "What—what is it you want?"

Michael threw the words. "To go beyond the force fields of the city. To go far out onto the Earth and live as long as we can, and then to die a natural death."

The half circle of faces turned to each other and muttered and whispered again. "In the name of God…. Let them go…. Contaminate us…. Like animals…. Get them out of here…. *Let* them be finished…. Best for us all…. And them…."

There was a turning to the President again and hands thrusting him forward to within one step of Michael and Mary, who were standing there close together, as though attached.

Haltingly he said, "Go. Please go. Out onto the Earth—to die. You *will* die. The Earth is dead out there. You'll never see the city or your people again."

"We want a ground car," said Michael. "And supplies."

"A ground car," repeated the President. "And—supplies…. Yes."

"You can give us an escort, if you want to, out beyond the first range of mountains."

"There will be no escort," said the President firmly. "No one has been allowed to go out upon the Earth or to fly above it for many hundreds of years. We know it's there. That's enough. We couldn't bear the sight of it." He took a step back. "And we can't bear the sight of you any longer. Go now. Quickly!"

Michael and Mary did not let go of the lockets as they watched the half circle of faces move backward, staring, as though at corpses that should sink to the floor.

It was night. The city had been lost beyond the dead mounds of Earth that rolled away behind them, like a thousand ancient tombs. The ground car sat still on a crumbling road.

Looking up through the car's driving blister, they saw the stars sunk into the blue black ocean of space; saw the path of the Milky Way along which they had rushed, while they had been searching frantically for the place of salvation.

"If any one of the other couples had made it back," said Mary, "do you think they'd be with us?"

"I think they'd either be with us," he said, "or out in space again —or in prison."

She stared ahead along the beam of headlight that stabbed out into the night over the decaying road.

"How sorry are you," she said quietly, "coming with me?"

"All I know is, if I were out in space for long without you, I'd kill myself."

"Are we going to die out here, Michael?" she said, gesturing toward the wall of night that stood at the end of the headlight, "with the land?"

He turned from her, frowning, and drove the ground car forward, watching the headlights push back the darkness.

They followed the crumbling highway all night until light crept across the bald and cracked hills. The morning sun looked down upon the desolation ten feet above the horizon when the car stopped. They sat for a long time then, looking out upon the Earth's parched and inflamed skin. In the distance a wall of mountains rose like a great pile of bleached bones. Close ahead the rolling plains were motionless waves of dead Earth with a slight breeze stirring up little swirls of dust.

"I'm getting out," she said.

"I haven't the slightest idea how much farther to go, or why," said Michael shrugging. "It's all the same. Dirt and hills and mountains and sun and dust. It's really not much different from being out in space. We live in the car just like in a space ship. We've enough concentrated supplies to last for a year. How far do we go? Why? When?"

They stepped upon the Earth and felt the warmth of the sun and strolled toward the top of the hill.

"The air smells clean," he said.

"The ground feels good. I think I'll take off my shoes." She did. "Take off your boots, Michael. Try it."

Wearily he pulled off his boots, stood in his bare feet. "It takes me back."

"Yes," she said and began walking toward the hilltop.

He followed, his boots slung around his neck. "There was a road somewhere, with the dust between my toes. Or was it a dream?"

"I guess when the past is old enough," she said, "it becomes a dream."

He watched her footprints in the dust. “God, listen to the quiet.”

“I can’t seem to remember so much quiet around me. There’s always been the sound of a space ship, or the pumps back in the cities.”

He did not answer but continued to watch her footsteps and to feel the dust squishing up between his toes. Then suddenly:

“Mary!”

She stopped, whirling around.

He was staring down at her feet.

She followed his gaze.

“It’s grass!” He bent down. “Three blades.”

She knelt beside him. They touched the green blades.

“They’re new,” he said.

They stared, like religious devotees concentrating upon some sacred object.

He rose, pulling her up with him. They hurried to the top of the hill and stood very still, looking down into a valley. There were tiny patches of green and little trees sprouting, and here and there, a pale flower. The green was in a cluster, in the center of the valley and there was a tiny glint of sunlight in its center.

“Oh!”

Her hand found his.

They ran down the gentle slope, feeling the patches of green touch their feet, smelling a new freshness in the air. And coming to the little spring, they stood beside it and watched the crystal water that trickled along the valley floor and lost itself around a bend. They saw a furry, little animal scurry away and heard the twitter of a bird and saw it resting on a slim, bending branch. They heard the buzz of a bee, saw it light on a pale flower at their feet and work at the sweetness inside.

Mary knelt down and drank from the spring.

“It’s so cool. It must come from deep down.”

“It does,” he said. There were tears in his eyes and a tightness in

his throat. “From deep down.”

“We can *live* here, Michael!”

Slowly he looked all around until his sight stopped at the bottom of a hill. “We’ll build our house just beyond those rocks. We’ll dig and plant and you’ll have the child.”

“Yes!” she said. “Oh yes!”

“And the ones back in the city will know the Earth again. Sometime we’ll lead them back here and show them the Earth is coming alive.” He paused. “By following what we had to do for ourselves, we’ve found a way to save them.”

They remained kneeling in the silence beside the pool for a long time. They felt the sun on their backs and looked into the clean depth of the water deeply aware of the new life breathing all around them and of themselves absorbing it, and at the same time giving back to it the life that was their own.

There was only this quiet and breathing and warmth until Michael stood and picked up a rock and walked toward the base of the hill where he had decided to build the house.

UNIFORM OF A MAN

By Dave Dryfoos

Illustrated by Rudolph Palais

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After rescue, revenge was uppermost in Chet Barfield's mind; the hideous, bestial Agvars had to be taught a lesson they'd never forget. His rescuers seemed to disagree, however—until Chet learned his lesson too!

In the village clearing, under the diffuse red sun of Hedlot, Chet Barfield listened intently. Mostly he heard the villagers, the Agvars, noisy with the disregard for sound that comes of defective hearing.

But above their clamor was another note. No… Yes! There it was again—the swish-roar-scream of a spaceship!

Chet's heart lifted to the altitude of that ship. Rescue! Rescue was at hand for him, after three years as a prisoner.

Thought of it momentarily overcame the passivity that years of starvation had made his habit. He even forgot himself enough to walk erect a few steps, staring skyward—heavenward!—within cupped hands.

But the dense hardwood chain on his ankle brought him up short. When it tightened, he remembered, and slouched to all fours again, moving with the gorilla-like gait of the Agvars toward the unshaded post he was chained to.

He'd been observed. Pawfulls of dirt stung his bent and whip-scarred back, and a treble chorus stung his ears and nerves. The village boys were chanting derisively. Chet had never been able to learn the language, but the tone of voice was unmistakable.

He huddled against the post, knees to chin, hands clasped around his matted hair, awaiting the inevitable sticks and slops. He heard the children's voices fade as they scattered throughout the village of haphazard lean-tos in search of especially sickening things to throw. For a few minutes, then, he'd have a breather. But not for long—they wouldn't forget….

No. But the fellows hadn't forgotten him, either. He could stand this for a day or two more. A week or a month, even. It didn't matter. This would end—soon.

His turn would come! He'd make these devils suffer as he had suffered. He swore it!

He was glad he'd stayed alive for this. It had been a fight to live,

a struggle he'd often thought futile while he made it. Learning to eat whatever he could get, training himself to breathe the local atmosphere in the special rhythm its composition required, accepting degradations too cruel for a captive animal, avoiding the resistance that would have brought merciful murder…. All that, yet it felt strange, now, to be so glad he was alive.

He heard the children returning, and crouched lower. A few clots of garbage spattered against the post—teasers, to make him angry, so he'd turn to howl his rage, and offer his face as a target.

Good memories, these little beasts had. It was almost a year since he'd last done that….

Well, he had a memory, too. And while they pelted him—from fairly close range, now, with sharp rocks among the wads of filth—he could take refuge in the memory of those last glorious days on Earth.

Remembrance was itself a change brought by the roaring ship; usually he moped in a vegetative daze. But now he recalled how he'd looked in the tight white uniform: six feet of well-fed muscle accentuated by the garment's lines, the blue stars on each lapel just matching his eyes, the peak of his cap harmonizing with the straight line of his jaw.

He remembered how he'd sounded, speaking words of nonchalant and unfelt modesty in the soft Southern voice the girls had liked so well. He could have had his pick of girls. He'd been a picked man himself.

Highly selected—that was the phrase. He was highly selected, Chet reminded himself, shrinking as the children came closer and their missiles began to really hurt.

He'd been highly selected since his eighteenth year. At 25 he'd had seven years of pre-flight training—seven years of indoctrination specifically designed to give him self-confidence enough to face the void itself without flinching.

Now he flinched from children…. Still, the schooling had worked, he acknowledged—so well that when their ship crashed into this planet Hedlot's salty sea, his first reaction had been indignation at the elements.

His second thought had been for his comrades. But they went down with the ship; he alone had been hurled clear. Learning that, he'd swum resolutely in the direction he knew the shore to be, and made it.

Exhausted, all right—shocked, naked, half-dead really. But quite ready to point out his rank and identity to the first passer-by.

Lucky for him, Chet mused, that he'd had no chance to express his callow arrogance. Shock saved his life—sank him into a stupor, so

when the Agvars found him, he was helpless. He knew it was only because it had seemed perfectly safe that they'd tied him up and brought him to the village, instead of killing him then and there.

By the time he'd recovered somewhat from the initial shock and exhaustion, they were used to him, convinced he was harmless if well chained-up. And they played it safe by giving him nothing but a little water—no clothing, no shelter, no food….

They let him live, amused by the thirst that drove him to lap up each morning's drenching dew, fascinated by his ravenous appetite for the garbage they flung at him.

The Agvars—furry, savage half-men, with something of the dog and something of the ape and little of the man about them—the Agvars let him live, Chet realized, for exactly one reason: he made them feel superior.

They'd learn now! Even though the children had stopped shrieking and gone away, disgusted at his passivity, no villager's insensitive ears could yet hear the ship.

In their boastfulness, the Agvars had invited other tribes to come and look at him and poke at him and laugh at him. His presence was known over the whole planet. He'd be found, no matter where on Hedlot the spaceship landed.

And then would come the showdown!

But the showdown came earlier than he expected, speeded because the ship landed close by. Chet told himself he should have counted on that kind of accuracy, but he'd underestimated his fellow pilots.

He had himself signalled Earthside, just before the crash, that his ship was about to land. He'd given his position—described sea and shoreline. They'd find him, if he stayed chained to the post.

But he didn't. Taken unaware by the Agvars who loosed him, Chet was docile, happy even—certain they wouldn't hurt him now, but would try to minimize their former cruelty as they turned him over to the spacemen.

When they put new chains on him, around neck and waist, he thought it was only to make sure he didn't run away before they could deliver him ostentatiously to the ship.

A dozen adult males had gathered in the clearing, but that was hardly an unusual event. Even when they all started out, on a winding trail that didn't head in the direction of the ship's recent landing-sounds, Chet was convinced they were just circling some geographic obstacle.

He was interested in the forest of 20-foot mosses and 50-foot evergreen hardwoods pressing densely on each side of the trail.

Unconscious when they'd carried him from the beach, he'd never been out of the village since, had never inspected these woods. And he thought his mates from Earth would want to know about them.

Chet could easily have outdistanced the clumsy Agvars if not forced to imitate their crouching walk. But he knew from experience that to show off his erect stance and 18-inch height advantage would make them find some unpleasant way to put him in his place.

They'd shown him that quite often. He'd show *them*—but later, not just yet. And after showing them, he'd put these Agvars behind him—them, their filthy planet, and their scorching sun.

It had often tortured him, that gauzy, amorphous solar blaze, but never more than now. For the sun of Hedlot, when he glanced at it vengefully, proved from its position that he was not being taken to the ship, but away from it.

Disappointment didn't rouse Chet to a fighting pitch—it caused him to become crafty. Slyness and deceit, the indirect weapons of the powerless, were not attributes schooled into a student space-pilot. But he'd learned them tied naked to a sunbaked post. That, too, is an effective school.

He hung back, faking fatigue. Malingering brought him pokes and jerks, made the Agvars choke him and beat him and harangue him in their sullen mutter of clicks and growls and glottal catches. But some sense of urgency drove them to give up their fruitless sadism after a while, and drag him through the trail's blue mud by brute strength, two on the neck-chain, two hauling at his waist.

He let them. Not that he was inured to pain—he just was stubborn.

He wondered, once when they all stopped at a spring for a drink and some rest, whether their haranguing showed the Agvars were sorry they hadn't taught him their language. Probably not, he decided; probably they didn't want to think he could have learned it.

He'd tried, in the absence of lessons, by repeating what he heard around him. He'd learned a few words, of course. And for a while, a couple of villagers had seemed to enjoy and encourage his parrot-like attempts to recite whole sentences they voiced for him. But after a few beatings, Chet gathered that he'd only been mouthing obscenities. And that experience, plus inertia, had made him give up the attempt.

Just as well, he now decided. If they'd known of his technical skills, if they'd let him raise their standards, the Agvars might be carrying bows and arrows, instead of mere slings and sticks.

Their hard luck! What they didn't know, they'd never learn from him! The mere presence of a spaceship on the same planet gave him a buoyant feeling of contempt.

But though contempt helped him endure that journey through the tall mosses and taller trees, it couldn't ward off exhaustion. When the party stopped at the foot of a sheer rock spire that rose four or five hundred feet above the tallest growth, he collapsed and slept.

They woke him in the pre-dawn twilight and another group of Agvars took over. These—there were only three—looked older than the familiar villagers. And they'd smeared their faces with bands of red and yellow mud. He wondered….

He stopped wondering when they passed a pile of bones at the base of the spire. Among the grisly relics were skulls—brow-ridged, pointed, unmistakably Agvar. Sacrifices!

He was to be killed, then, to propitiate his own rescuers. His three guides—or guards—must be witch-doctors! He let them drag him along while he thought about it.

They'd give him no breakfast, not even water. If they'd eaten themselves, it was while he still slept. The scraps, if any, hadn't been flung in his face, and there'd been no smooth post to lick the dew from.

Hunger and thirst were nothing new, but neither was the resulting lethargy. Realizing his danger, Chet could only hang back.

Today though that was an old stall; the witch-doctors seemed to expect it. They broke branches from the trees and beat him till he bled. And when the climb up the rocks began, they put one of their number behind him to push, set the other two in front to pull, and tried by main strength to haul him up the five hundred foot rock-face.

Hazily, not hastily, Chet tried to think of a way out. His starved brain could come up with nothing. That, he finally decided, was only natural; it was not thinking that was needed, but action.

Still, he wasn't precipitate. Caution reinforced his habitual lassitude while trying to dispell it. Half a dozen times he tensed for combat, only to relax hopelessly. But finally he found a place—and the will—to make a stand.

He passed up a wide shelf, and let them tug him along a narrow ledge without much objection. He chose a near-vertical pitch about a hundred feet from the bottom—a mere crack that slanted upward to the right, offering the shallowest of hand- and foot-holds.

He could only hope that he wasn't in sight from the trail—or else that the villagers had left. He couldn't see through the treetops to make sure. But he hadn't the strength to worry.

He froze to the rock, pulling as if in fright. The two witch-doctors in single file above him jerked on the chains they held. But they needed a hand apiece to hold on with, and couldn't lift him.

The one below, standing on a six-inch ledge, tried to push. When

that didn't work, he broke off a chunk of rock and beat Chet's left foot with it.

Spurred by the sudden pain, Chet kicked the witch-doctor in the face. The Agvar fell, screaming—until he crashed through the treetops and was still.

To Chet, forgetful of his hearing superiority, it seemed as if that outcry would be heard on Earth itself. Certainly he expected it to alarm the countryside. Still, unless the swift foot-thrust had been seen, no one would be sure the witch-doctor's fall was not an accident….

Chet had tasted victory for the first time in three years! He'd had a little revenge, and he wanted more. He could take the other two witch-doctors with him to death!

He put all his weight on the chains they held. But they chose not to die—let go, instead, to save themselves. The chain-ends rattled past, dislodging a small avalanche of dust and gravel and bruising stones—dislodging *him* when the full weights jerked at neck and waist.

Prepared, he didn't let himself be pulled away from the cliff's face. He slid down it to the ledge from which the Agvar below him had fallen. There he teetered a moment, balancing precariously on toes scraped raw in his slide. Clawing fingers found a crack to the right, a knob to the left—safety! He clung there breathless.

No time for resting! Rattling stones warned of pursuit. He looked quickly around, found a route, and after a short traverse let himself slide to a long talus-slope. Down it he ran barefoot through sharp debris into concealing mosses.

The silence alarmed him. But it freed him from the need for craft; he didn't know what to avoid nor where it might be lurking, so he set out for the spaceship by what he hoped was the shortest way.

In the village, he'd located the landing-place by sound, fixed it by sun. The sun would guide him now. Not accurately, but well enough.

The ship would have landed in a clearing. Standing on its tail, it should loom high over the woods. And its men would scatter—he ought to run into one.

Run he did, trotting under thirty pounds of hardwood chain on reserves of strength dredged from a deep pit of desperation, through a forest overgrown with menace, full of life he could always sense but seldom see—of noises whose origin he couldn't guess.

The Agvars, for all their inferior hearing, could at least interpret what they heard. Chet couldn't. Every whispered cry, wild grunt and muttered growl was completely unfamiliar. He didn't know which sound signalled danger. He feared them all.

But more than sounds he feared the silence that chinked the logs

of time between each nerve-wracking noise. Often he had to stop and rest, and silence threatened him then like the ominous quiet of bated breath. When he'd force himself to go on, each tree seemed like a porchful of malicious old women, pretending to disregard him as he passed, certain to make trouble when he'd gone. The buzz of small life-forms was a deprecatory murmur, ready at any second to burst into condemnation and terror….

What was that sound? And that? Noises that seemed out of place in their familiarity pinned him to the forest floor.

It was only the village. Satisfied, he worked up courage to skirt the place and walk on toward the ship.

But he was near collapse. When he heard human voices he could only yell incoherently once or twice, sob, and pass out.

Dimly through succeeding days Chet was aware of the ship's sickbay, of the enlisted attendants, the hovering doctor, the silent commander. Later he realized he'd been kept under opiates so his body could recover while his mind rested. At the time, he felt only the dimness.

It wore off abruptly. He was in a civilized cot, stretching luxuriously, aware of warmth and comfort and a cheerful voice that seemed familiar.

He opened his eyes. A fat young corpsman had been watching.

"How do you feel, sir?" the boy said. "Ready for coffee?"

"Sure," Chet answered. And grinned lazily as he sat up to sip the proffered cup. "You've taken good care of me."

"Used to be a barber in civilian life," the boy said smugly. And Chet found with an exploratory hand that he'd been shaven and shorn, bathed, bandaged where necessary—even, he saw, clad in a pair of fancy red broadcloth pajamas.

"You've got me cleaned up, all right," he said. "Whose p.j.'s have I got on?"

"Dr. Pine's, sir. You'll see him in a couple of minutes—he and the Old Man been waiting to question you. There's a robe and slippers, if you want me to help you get up…."

"I'm not helpless," Chet said, boasting in his turn. He proved it by climbing—gingerly—out of the cot. The boy helped him into the robe, found the slippers, pushed the small room's one chair an inch closer to the open porthole, and left, closing the door behind him.

Vaguely Chet found he knew the two men who soon entered the room—they'd been there before. But this was his first fully conscious look at them. Commander Seymour, the C.O., looked surprisingly young for his job. He *was* young, Chet decided—not over thirty-five—

and his short slight figure made him seem younger still.

He had few words. “You’re looking fine, Barfield,” he said, and sat on the edge of the cot, thin face impassive, gray eyes alert.

Dr. Pine—tall, balding, affable—was associated in Chet’s mind with hypodermic needles, bitter medicines, restrictions. Today, the doctor gave him a firm and friendly handshake, but yesterday, Chet felt, that same hand had inflicted pain.

“Glad to see you looking so well,” the doctor said, taking a stance against the wall by the porthole. He sounded sincere enough, but Chet, resuming his chair, wondered how much of the gladness was based on the doctor’s pride in professional handiwork.

There was an awkward pause. Chet remembered to murmur polite replies to the men who were so obviously sizing him up. Then he asked, “When do you think I’ll be ready for duty?”

His visitors exchanged a glance. “Later,” Commander Seymour said. “Take it easy while you can, Barfield.” He smiled unconvincingly at what must have been meant as a joke.

Talk again lapsed, and Chet became uncomfortable. “The corpsman said you wanted to ask me some things,” he said. And added, “You’ve already questioned me, haven’t you?”

“Only a little,” Dr. Pine said, flexing his long fingers and looking down at them. “We—ah—we had to find out about your shipmates. Commander Seymour wanted to look for them, naturally….”

Naturally…. “Are we going to leave here now, sir?” Chet asked the commander.

“Not yet,” he said. “Dr. Pine has a job to do.”

“What’s that, Doctor?”

"I'm going to study your Agvar friends, Mr. Barfield. Want to help?"

"Sure," Chet said. "There's nothing I'd rather do than bring you a few corpses to dissect."

"That—ah—that isn't the idea," Dr. Pine said, bending his fingers and rocking from toes to heels. "I—ah—I want to do a little anthropology—study them in the life…."

"Why?" Chet demanded. "I can tell you all about them. I can tell you what they did to me, too! They don't deserve to live! And this planet won't be safe for spacemen till they're dead. Why waste time studying them? It isn't as if you were a professional anthropologist, sir—didn't you give me medical care?"

"Yes…. But I do anthropology, too. Medical help—ah—gains the confidence of the people…."

"You mean—?" Chet was at first incredulous, then outraged. "You mean you're not going to punish them?"

"That's right," Dr. Pine said, smiling.

"That's wrong!" Chet contradicted.

Cheeks burning, he turned to Commander Seymour. "How about you, sir? Do you want your men chained to a post if they get captured? Do you want me to dismiss three years of torture as a mistake, or something? Do you want—"

"Here, here!" Commander Seymour said. He didn't raise his voice. But as he rose from the cot, Chet rose with him, and found himself at attention. They eyed each other.

"Relax," Dr. Pine suggested. "Please sit down—both of you."

Commander Seymour obeyed his subordinate. But Chet, still standing, still angry, turned hotly on the doctor.

"I can't just sit and let you talk about rewarding the Agvars for torturing me!" he cried. "We don't have to appease them—they can't fight. You don't have to be afraid—"

"That'll do, Barfield!" Commander Seymour was on his feet again, and his tone was sharp. It quieted Chet instantly.

In silence he watched Commander Seymour motion Dr. Pine to follow him out the door. Someone locked it after them.

Alternately tossing on the cot and pacing the floor, Chet seethed for hours. His first interview with the new C.O., and two bawlings-out in five minutes! Because of Pine—Pine, who kept him confined in this room, seeing no one but the attendants, having his meals alone….

When a day passed, and then two, and he felt his strength returning, Chet was sure that Dr. Pine kept him out of the wardroom and away from the other officers only as punishment. Three years a prisoner—and a prisoner still! By the time Commander Seymour came

to see him again, Chet had spent hours plotting revenge.

"Barfield," the commander said, "Dr. Pine is going—alone—to the village you escaped from. He'll pretend he's you, or someone like you—whichever he can get away with. So here's your chance for a little fresh air—you can guide us to the village."

"Does that mean I go on active duty, sir?"

"Not quite. Dr. Pine hasn't released you from sickbay."

Pine again! Pine found him good enough to imitate, it seemed, but not good enough to put on duty.

Suddenly Chet saw the possibilities. So Pine was going to impersonate him? Then Pine would be taken for an escaped sacrifice, a prisoner who'd killed a witch-doctor!

Tell him? Huh. Let him find out the hard way! Then even he, yellow as he was, would want revenge on the Agvars. If he survived their welcome….

"I'll be *glad* to go, sir," Chet said.

They brought him fatigues, not a dress uniform. But fatigues and shoes—even tight ones—were clothing, at least. And clothing would change his appearance. The Agvars had never seen him dressed, nor, since his first days, with a haircut and shave. Whether Pine's impersonation worked or not, Chet saw no danger for himself in approaching the village. But he wondered how it was to be managed.

He was told the plan when Commander Seymour and Dr. Pine met him outside by the ship's tail. The commander, who was armed, and the doctor, already naked except for a pair of slippers and a sunlamp tan, would go with him by the shortest route direct to the village. But only Dr. Pine would enter it.

Commander Seymour explained Chet's part—and his own. "Barfield," he said, "I want you to find and point out some kind of game animal they use for food. I count on killing something after we come under the Agvars' observation. That should show off our weapon-superiority—and pave the way for a feast."

"No medical stuff?" Chet asked sarcastically. "I thought Dr. Pine was supposed to cure all their ills, not give them indigestion."

"He has to get their confidence before he can treat them," Commander Seymour explained seriously. "And on a strange planet like this, he's taking quite a chance to try treatment at any time: if it fails, they're apt to accuse him of murder!"

Chet said nothing. But he felt as if he'd drawn a wild card in a poker game.

They'd entered the woods. Even before that, Dr. Pine had lagged because his slippers kept falling off, and now he brought up the rear.

Chet, in the lead, took a last long look at the ship before the trees and mosses cut off his view.

He went on slowed by vague reluctance. He didn't like this forest. The trees dwarfed and oppressed him. Old fears began to stir and gnaw, but at new places.

Perhaps the two men he guided would stand together against him. If so, revenge on one would cut him off from both as sharply as the forest cut him off from the ship….

Well, it was worth it! They hadn't put him on duty, hadn't accepted him as one of themselves…. He couldn't be cut off much more than he was already!

And Seymour might listen to reason. After all, he was a practical man, a leader. And Pine was yellow!

"What's Pine after, sir?" Chet asked over his shoulder. "Why take these risks you've mentioned?"

"Well, partly for safety: if we kill any Agvars, we're likely to have to kill them all, or have the survivors to contend with indefinitely. That might cost us some casualties…. And of course there's the research angle, but that's out of my line."

"What's the matter with punishment, sir—discipline? You use discipline on your crew—why not on their enemies?"

"Because the men understand the rules and the penalties. The Agvars don't."

"Kill them, sir! That they'll understand!"

"No!" Commander Seymour spoke sharply. "If they don't fight back, that's cold-blooded slaughter. If they do, it's war. I don't hold with butchery, Barfield, and I certainly won't risk casualties just to give you a cheap feeling of satisfaction!"

He couldn't escape. Commander Seymour, looking from over Chet's shoulder like a walking sneer, stuck close. But he gave the impression of following a man who smelled bad.

Was he? Chet wondered.

Wondering, he unconsciously hung his head, slowed—stopped. Dr. Pine caught up. He and Commander Seymour, faintly breathless from the trying need to regulate their respiration consciously, looked at Chet questioningly.

Again they were sizing him up. Suddenly Chet wished he could go back to that first interview in the sickbay, and change all the things he'd said.

"We can't go on!" he blurted. "You don't know what you're getting into, Doctor!"

"Oh?" said Dr. Pine agreeably. "I know more than you think, young feller." He smiled encouragingly.

"That—that I've killed a witch-doctor? That you may be taken for

a murderer?"

"Sure! You—ah—you talked about it under drugs. We… weren't spying, Chet. We just wanted you to tell your story without reliving all the agony. It wasn't intended as—ah—a trap…." He massaged his fingers apologetically.

"No…." Chet agreed. "But-I-was-trying-to-lead-*you*-into-one!"

Had he said that aloud? Chet couldn't be sure.

He listened for his own voice. The woods were quiet. His breathing seemed strangely loud. He held it—and heard the Agvars moving in the woods. Rustling, scraping, crackling—grunting their guttural dialog. Crashing! Threatening them!

"Let's go back!" he urged, trying to sound casual. But his trail was blocked.

"Stick around," Dr. Pine suggested easily. "You—ah—you haven't said anything we didn't know. We're going right ahead."

"But why?" Once more Chet was hotly incredulous. "To risk your life for a few stray facts? Become a casualty while trying to *avoid* casualties? It doesn't make sense!"

Dr. Pine stared at his own hands as if to hide his shyness in them. "As to the fact-seeking," he said slowly, "well… it's a matter of opinion. I've lost a few classmates…. Risks in research are commonplace—and accepted as worthwhile by most people….

"And—ah—peace…. You once called it appeasement, but it isn't, always. Well, look. If we fought those Agvars, somebody'd have to take a patrol into their village and capture prisoners for our Intelligence, right?"

Chet nodded dumbly.

"Well, in a way, I—ah—am the peaceful equivalent of that patrol. The—ah—risk I run is less than if we had a war and a patrol skirmish as part of it, though. And why in the world not take for peace a risk we'd routinely accept in war?"

Why not? But why not minimize it, just the same. The Agvars, invisible but noisy, were all around them, now. At any moment the woods might rain spears.

"It would be safer with two of us," Chet said musingly. "Your knowledge of anthropology and medicine—mine of the people—"

"Barfield, you're still on the sicklist," Commander Seymour pointed out. He watched Chet's face for a long moment before adding, "Still—if you're over your sick-minded need for revenge—it's possible Dr. Pine may find you fit. It's up to him."

Chet was afraid to ask directly. He pleaded with his eyes.

Dr. Pine grinned broadly at the both. "He's ready for duty, sir," he said.

Commander Seymour stepped back and scowled. “All right, Mr. Barfield,” he barked, “I’ll give you just three minutes to change to the uniform of the day!”

Chet’s jaw dropped. His vision, also downcast, noted the fatigues he wore, the muddy shoes. Then he looked up, saw the twinkle in his C.O.’s eyes, and understood.

In exactly three minutes he made the required change. He would enter the village as he’d left it—in the undress uniform of a Man….

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